

## ***Is Heart of Darkness A Critique of Colonialism?***

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**Abstract:** Joseph Conrad is a world renown author. We can relate Conrad and his work to colonialism and imperialism. One of his works that has received many critical views is *Heart of Darkness* (HOD). It has survived time and has become a classic of the English literature canon. The question that arises as we read this text is that “Is Conrad a critique of colonialism or does he support it?” To answer the question this essay will use the postcolonial lens to read the work. One of the theorists used to discuss Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* will be Edward Said and his famous work *Orientalism*. We will come to the conclusion as to whether the author defends colonialism or is a voice against it.

**Keywords:** colonialism, orientalism, Conrad, critique, Africa

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### **Introduction**

Joseph Conrad is a prominent author. He has produced many texts that deal with the Orient. He describes foreign lands and its people well. He is a colonial writer and wrote during the peak of colonialism. Thus, we can relate Conrad and his work to colonialism. One of his works that has received many critical views is *Heart of Darkness* (HOD). It has survived time and become a classic of the English literature canon. The question that arises as we read this text is that “Is Conrad a critique of colonialism or does he support it?”

To answer the question posed above we will read HOD using Edward Said’s *Orientalism*[1] and a later text, *Culture and Imperialism*[2]. *Orientalism* pioneered discussions on postcolonialism. It is the first theoretical text on the subject. Said argues that the Orient is partially a European contrivance. This paper will use Said’s theory to read the Africa that has been depicted by Conrad vis-à-vis *Heart of Darkness*.

One interesting definition of the term orientalism can be found on the internet. It states, “*Orientalism* is a term used especially in art for the imitation or depiction of aspects of Eastern cultures in the West by writers, designers and artists. In particular, Orientalist painting, depicting more specifically “the Middle East and North Africa”, was one of the many specialisms of 19th century Academic art. Since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the term has arguably acquired a negative connotation.” [3]. Since orientalism also included Africa it is appropriate for this paper to use

Said’s concept of orientalism to read a text that concentrates on Africa.

### **What is Orientalism?**

Said in *Orientalism*[1] argues that the Orient is partially a European contrivance and has been a locale of romance, exotic creatures, obsessive memories and scenery and extraordinary experience since antiquity. The term Oriental, according to Said, is canonical since Chaucer, Mandeville, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope and Byron used it. “It designated Asia or the East, geographically, morally, culturally” [1]. Discourses that have been written on the Orient throughout history have portrayed and manipulated the Other’s being, culture and country as cliches. They have come into being through the encounter of two different cultures, the West and the East, and have transpired into Orientalism. However, we have to take into account that there has never been a pure, or unconditional Orient as there has never been a nonmaterial form of Orientalism, much less something so innocent as an “idea of the Orient”. What is characteristic of Orientalism is that it expresses strength of the West and the weakness of the Orient as seen by the West [1].

The Orientalist and Orientalism have been classified into three different categories. In his first definition Said states that the Orientalist conducts Orientalism when he/she teaches, writes about and researches the Orient. This includes anthropologists, sociologists, historians and philologists. Thus, in this way Orientalism “lives on academically through its theses about the Orient and the Oriental” [1]. The second definition that Said gives is that Orientalism is

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based on ontological and epistemological distinction made between the East and the West. Poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators carried this out. Their work escalated “elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions and political account of the Orient, its people, customs, “mind”, destiny and so on” [1]. Said’s third interpretation of Orientalism is that it was institutionalized in the late 18th century in order to make statements about the Orient, authorize views over it, describe it, rule over it, settle over it and teach Orientalism. This created a Western style domination, authority, and restructuring of the Orient [1].

The process that is Orientalism is didactic. According to Said it is a discipline that represents “institutionalized Western knowledge of the Orient” and it exercises a “three-way force”: on the Orientalist, who depicts the Orient as he sees it, on the Orient, that is described from a Western view point because it is different from the West, and on the Western “consumer” of Orientalism who accepts the Orientalist’s view though he (the reader) is uninitiated about the Orient and its truth. The *truth* about the Orient is not based on a material (Orient) but on “learned judgement” as to how Orientalists perceive and depict it [1].

### **The growth of Orientalism**

The growth of colonialism of space and economies has been much discussed. Said argues that imperialism and Orientalism grew concurrently from 1815-1914. This is the period where European colonialism expanded from 35% to 85% and every continent on earth was affected especially Asia and Africa which were dominated by the British and French. During this era there was immense advance in the institutions and in the content of Orientalist discourse. Orientalism strengthened colonialism and was strengthened by it [1]. 19th and 20th century Orientalism unrelentingly constructed the whole Orient [1]. Said argues that the use of the terms Western and Oriental has created a wider divide between the two and emphasizes each party’s cultural difference. Because Orientalism originates from the West, Western power over the Orient is taken for granted like scientific truth [1].

Western Orientalism started with colonialism and imperialism by Europeans of the Other. According to Said from the beginning of the 19th century until the end of World War II France and Britain dictated the Orient and Orientalism [1].

Orientalism sustains the binary opposition of the West and East. The cultural hegemony of the West has given Orientalism the strength that it has today. European culture is hegemonic and viewed as superior to non-European people and cultures, because

Orientalism has fed the idea of a superior European identity to the world. European ideas of Oriental backwardness also reiterate European superiority via Orientalism [1]. Said maintains that Orientalism spread and became fertile because it was never challenged since the Oriental initially accepted the Europeans without suspicion [1]. Said also argues that the 19th and 20th century Western view of the Orient is that either the Orient is inferior to the West or in need of corrective study by the West. Thus, Orientalism places the Orientals in the classroom, criminal court, prison or the illustrated manual and scrutinize, study, judge, discipline and govern them [1].

Said argues that Orientalism is based upon externals by which the Orientalist (poet/scholar) makes the Orient speak by describing the Orient and interpreting its mysteries “for and to the West” [1]. The Orientalist’s discourse testifies that the Orientalist is outside the Orient as an existential and moral fact [1]. The authenticity and the sense of Orientalism in these discourses depend on the West rather than the Orient. Orientalism is indebted to Western techniques of representation that makes the Orient “visible”, “clear” and “there” in the discourses written on it. These representations rely on institutions, traditions, conventions and agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects. They do not rely on a far off and common Orient [1].

### **The Orient within Orientalism**

In this section I explain what the Orient is in the realms of Orientalism via Said’s research. The Orient Other, though his/her culture has not been created by the Western Orientalist scholar, has been judged and put in a stereotypical mould for public viewing and entertainment.

Nevertheless, Orientalism does not mean that the East is an idea that was created by the West. Said argues that like the West the Orient is an idea that has a history and tradition of thought, imagery, vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West [1]. Thus, the Orient is not merely a creation or a superficial European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. It is valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient.

Therefore, the structure of Orientalism is more than lies or myths, because these would simply disappear. Orientalism’s continued study has added knowledge in the Western consciousness [1].

Oriental discourse put a face and a mould to the Oriental character. Ideas about it influenced the idea of the West and the Other. In many ways this rigidified the notion of the superior West and the inferior Orient

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because the difference between them was highlighted by Orientalist discourse [1]. Said refers to a lecture given by Arthur James Balfour, a former British prime minister, which indicates that Balfour takes for granted British superiority and Egyptian inferiority. Balfour's ideas are an echo of the Western psyche in its relation to the East. Balfour indicates that the Western knowledge of the Other's culture (Egypt); its origins, prime and decline make the West superior to the East. This is due to the fact that the object is vulnerable to scrutiny, and to have knowledge of the object means to dominate it and have authority over it [1]. It means that the West denies freedom to the East.

However, Said argues, Balfour does not state if Easterners appreciate "the good that is being done them by colonial occupation" because Balfour does not allow the Egyptian to speak [1]. The Egyptian is not given a voice because Egyptian voices would be dissenting voices, and Said argues that in the eyes of Balfour, any Egyptian who spoke would be the "agitator" rather than the "good native" [1]. This is parallel to Lord Cromer's views who was England's representative in Egypt and who thought that "Subject races did not have it in them to know what was good for them" [1].

Said argues that an Orientalist writer must first of all locate himself or herself vis-à-vis the Orient. This will then influence his/her rendition of the Orient. The tools that he/she employs: voice, structure, images, themes and motifs will direct the writer's approach towards his/her reader, give him/her authority to represent and speak on the Orient's behalf and as well as provide means to govern the Orient. All this does not take place in the abstract because according to Said all writers assume some Oriental precedent and previous knowledge of the Orient that he/she refers to and relies on. Thus, each work on the Orient is associated to other works, audiences, institutions and the Orient which then gives Orientalism its strength and authority [1]. Therefore, colonial fiction has not been produced in a vacuum.

Ultimately Orientalism is a political vision of reality that promotes the difference between the West and the Other. It limited the exploration/rendition of fictional discourse say of Flaubert, Nerval or Scott [1]. Westerners no matter how inferior to Orientals are still seen as a head above the Orientals. The Other is not seen "quite as human" [1] as the West. Said argues that in the "electronic, postmodern world" stereotypes of the Orient have been reinforced. Information about the Orient on television, films and media resources has been forced into standardized moulds. In relation to the Orient "standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of the mysterious Orient" [1]. Orientalist reality is antihuman and persistent.

Orientalism as a discourse presents to the West an Orient that is fixed in time and place. Oriental culture, politics and social history only comes into being for the West in response to the West. Thus, the West is the actor and the Orient is a passive reactor. The West becomes the spectator, judge and jury of Oriental behaviour [1].

This brings me to Said's argument that knowledge of the Orient creates the Orient, the Oriental and the Oriental's world [1]. What the Oriental knows of his world is from the knowledge manipulated by the West of the Orient [1].

### **Narratives of power**

This section introduces and discusses Said's *Culture and imperialism*[2]. While *Orientalism*[4] concentrated on the Middle-East, Said's 1993 project does justice to other postcolonial worlds and discourses, other than the Arab world. He criticizes Grand narratives of the Enlightenment and modern writings as well in his later work.

In *Culture and imperialism*[2], Said argues that narratives are an important agenda of colonialism because for the West narratives play an important part in their battle over foreign lands. Yet according to Said stories are not merely renditions of strange regions of the world by explorers and novelists. There is a dual function of narratives because they are a "method that colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" [2]. Said uses metaphors to make a connection between nations and narratives. According to him, Grand narratives of emancipation and Enlightenment mobilized the colonized people to pursue and gain their independence [2].

Ideals like equality and freedom have been around since the existence of the Grand narratives. However, Said found very few British or French artists opposed the ideas of subject or inferior races that were used by the colonial powers "as matter of course in ruling India and Algeria" [2]. One of the examples of colonial narratives that Said gives is Conrad's work. He says that Conrad's discourse is a precursor of later fictions and discourses. These works, influenced by Conrad, be they novels by individuals like V.S. Naipaul and Graham Greene or Robert Stone, theories of imperialism, travel writings or films, their specialty are to "deliver the non-European world either for analysis and judgement or for satisfying the exotic tastes of European and North American audiences" [2].

Conrad is an important fixture in the discussions on imperialism. Said argues that even today the Western world has not been able to move away from the issues that Conrad presented in his fiction: the evils of imperialism and the argument that the

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Westerners has a right to rule the Other or simply “make the world safe for democracy” [2]. Said further argues that, “At least Conrad had the courage to see that no such schemes ever succeeded...” [2].

Said implies that the novel as a genre is a product of ‘bourgeois society’. He argues that the novel and imperialism are inseparable, and so it is impossible to discuss one without the other [2]. He uses Conrad’s *Nostromo* as an example. According to him “Conrad allows the reader to see that imperialism is a system” which offers “a profoundly unforgiving” view. Conrad is a pioneer who noticed what was going on and was brave enough to give voice to his self-doubt. He articulates the criticisms that other colonial discourses of his time did not dare speak about or about which they were ignorant. Conrad saw the Other with compassion and he sensed the evils of colonialism, and portrayed both through his novels. However, he managed simultaneously to reiterate and criticize colonial discourse.

Conrad may not have managed to shatter the ephemeral image of the superiority of empire, but he certainly did plant the seeds of doubt about other colonial discourses. His *Heart of Darkness* (HOD) may not have been such a harsh critique of colonialism but it cannot be denied it is a critique of colonial discourse.

Said’s theories offer a great deal towards structuring the theoretical framework for the methodology applied to read and criticize HOD. He explains Western Orientalism, his criticism of the colonial Western agendas are important in my discussions. His 1993 project discusses the regurgitation of the Western agendas by postcolonial writers. Both works defend the sanctity and freedom of people, race, culture and religion as well as equality.

### **Heart of Darkness: An Analysis**

Heart of Darkness was published as a three part serial in 1899 in Blackwood’s Magazine. Later in 1903 it was printed and circulated in book form. The story begins in England on a yawl called the Nellie which is docked at the Thames in London. The story is within a story which is called a frame narrative. Charles Marlow the narrator of most of the book tells his fellow passengers that are on board of the Nellie of his adventure in the heart of Africa<sup>1</sup> and the story of a man named Kurtz whom he tried to save from the heart of darkness. We see Africa or as it is called the heart of darkness vis-à-vis Marlow’s gaze and experience.

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<sup>1</sup>Which is not actually mentioned or named in the fiction, but we can draw conclusions that it is the Congo that Conrad is talking about because he was once stationed in that country.

Heart of Darkness deals with the issue of colonialism. We are made to think of colonialism seriously through this passage:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to... [5].

What Conrad tries to tell us is that colonialism occurred because of the difference that was established to be between the colonizer and the colonized subjects; the difference in skin colour and facial structure. It was made to come into being by something that is not concrete, an “idea” alone. The idea then sprouted a belief system that colonizers used to legalize colonialism. The idea was made concrete by people like Charles Darwin who wrote *The Origins of Species* and John Stuart Mill’s *Minute on Indian Education*. Both books were published in the 19th century, at the peak of colonialism. These books are orientalist discourses that legitimized the idea behind colonialism.

However, Conrad unlike his predecessors gives us a different picture of colonialism. The idea that Conrad puts in the minds of his readers is that colonialism is not attractive, if one thinks about it in depth. The idea of how the heart of darkness changes Westerners is brought up by Conrad. It has a ‘bad’ influence on them. This is brought forward by Conrad via Marlow’s story of the Dane who was killed fighting over two black hens. He was stabbed by the son of the chief of the village from whom he had bought the hens. He was killed while he was beating the chief with a stick. Marlow says that the Dane was known to be “...the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs” [5]. The mysterious heart of darkness turns the mildest human beings into aggressive souls. It is the duties of this man that Marlow takes over.

Conrad does not paint a beautiful picture of the heart of darkness for his audience. This is evident in the description of the place that Marlow was going to “I was going into the yellow [referring to the colour of the location on the map] Dead in the centre. And the river was there-fascinating – deadly – like a snake” [5]. The locale is depicted to be dangerous by Conrad. When he uses the simile “like a snake” it brings to mind that the river is unsafe.

On this river that he observes on the map and describes as deadly as a snake he sees the deficiency of colonialism. Conrad via Marlow illustrates an incident



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on the river that has a very close connection to the idea of colonialism. He states,

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign drooped limp like a rag; the muzzles of long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was incomprehensible, firing into a continent...There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives – he called them enemies! – hidden out of sight somewhere[5].

The quotation above shows the meaninglessness of colonialism. The ship was firing into emptiness to kill unseen enemies. This portrays the futility of colonialism. Here Conrad criticizes the act of colonialism and pointless wars that are carried out in foreign lands. Marlow sees the firing of the cannon into nothingness as a sort of craziness. This thought is not erased by the explanation of one of his shipmates that state there are natives that are seen as enemies by the French. The idea that Conrad succeeds in putting into the readers minds is that colonialism and wars against the natives of colonized states are a sort of insanity.

The effect of Africa (the wilderness) on the white man is also discussed earlier in this novel. It is a precursor of what awaits Marlow in the heart of darkness. Conrad tells us that Africa has an effect on the white man. A Swedish ship captain talks of this to Marlow. As their conversation sets off:

'The other day I took up a man who hanged himself on the road. He was a Swede, too.' 'Hanged himself! Why in God's name?' I cried. He kept on looking out watchfully. 'Who knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps.'[5].

We are given the idea that the country is not suitable for the white man. The example of the Swede that commits suicide for no apparent reason suggests this. The example of the Dane previously discussed and the above example builds the plot towards us meeting Kurtz in the novel.

Conrad also portrays the dissipation and pointlessness of colonialism that has occurred in the heart of darkness. The text portrays waste and senseless things that are being done for no apparent reason:

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. 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. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly. I blinked, the path was steep. A horn tooted to the right, and I saw black people run. A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way of anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on[5].

The blasting of the hill that is not in the way of the railway track as Marlow sees it is not productive. The over turned railway truck represents the uselessness of colonialism. The scene that has been painted for us by the author depicts the futility of colonialism.

Conrad via Marlow brings three incidents together and looks at the events with a critical gaze. We, the readers, become part of this gaze. He criticizes the absurdity and worthlessness of colonialism. We are shown images of six black men that have "black rags wound around their loins" [5] which are chained together carrying "small baskets of earth on their heads" [5]. They are malnourished. Marlow hears another blast from the hill and thinks of the ship that was blasting into nothingness. He thinks that it is illogical for these thin undernourished men to be the enemies and he concludes that the law that has been passed in the heart of darkness is as mysterious as the sea. A white man with a rifle is seen as eagerly guarding the "savages" as Marlow describes the natives [5]. Though he is a critique of colonialism Conrad, the white man, cannot depart from the idea of seeing the natives as the Other. As has been discussed by Said that the native is always seen as inferior to the Occident. Therefore he labels the natives as savage.

Conrad's criticism of colonialism reaches its climax when we are introduced to Kurtz. The man that is revered and envied as well as hated by some of his fellow white men. He comes under our critical gaze as Marlow's journey up river continues. Marlow hears of him before he gets to meet the man. He listens to fabulous stories about Kurtz and how he is doing good in the heart of darkness and his capacity of sending back to Europe the most ivory as compared to his colleagues.

When Marlow reaches Kurtz's station he meets with a Russian who is Kurtz's acquaintance. The man asks Marlow to take Kurtz away [5]. From him we find out that Kurtz has gone native. He and the tribe that he

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lives with raid the country for ivory[5]. We are told that Kurtz also tried to kill the Russian for the little ivory that he had with him. The Russian gave him the ivory and saved his life [5].

Marlow considers Kurtz to have gone mad as he listens to the details told by the Russian. We are informed that Marlow goes hunting for ivory hunt with his tribe[5]. As Marlow listens to this he skims the area with his binoculars and he sees knobs on stakes. Another inspection makes him realize that they are human heads. He is disgusted when he realizes this [5].

Marlow forms an opinion of Kurtz as he listens to the Russian and the manager that has followed him to rescue Kurtz, and his view of the heads. According to Marlow, the heads showed that,

...he lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last – only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself that he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within because him he was hollow at the core .... [5].

The excerpt above juxtaposes Kurtz and the wilderness. The wilderness is the other to the West. Marlow implies that Kurtz has become degenerate because the wilderness has taken over. However unlike other Orientalist discourses of his time that mostly put the blame on the Other for the failure of the white man, Conrad states vis-à-vis Marlow that the wilderness could take over Kurtz's life because he was "hollow at the core" [5]. If Kurtz was a whole person he would not be in the state that he was in when Marlow found him. If he had self-restraint and had inner checks on his personality he would not have gone native and headed the tribe on ivory hunting raids and murdered across the country. The heads on the stakes show that Kurtz was indeed a debased person.

Kurtz does not live to return to his motherland. Conrad does not allow this to happen. Kurtz is degenerate, a mark on the white man's personality. He is not allowed to live because this would mean that Conrad advocated debauchery. His last moments are described to us via Marlow. He states,

One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for

death.'...''Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on the ivory face the expression of sombre pride, the ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath – "The horror! The horror!" [5].

Kurtz's last moments are not beautiful. His life that he has lived in the heart of darkness where he uses his power without restraint flashes in front of his eyes at the moment of death. His cry, "The horror! The horror!" reveals that he views his past with dismay and revulsion. At this moment of truth could he have been apologizing for the degrading life that he has lead? If we view Conrad's text as a critique of colonialism then we can say that Kurtz's last moments and death is an apology for the pointlessness of colonialism.

### Conclusion

Conrad is indeed a prominent author who was an expert on the Orient and Africa. The many texts that he has produced describe these foreign lands and its people well. Because he wrote during the peak of colonialism he can be labelled as a colonial writer as well as an orientalist. Thus, HOD can be related to colonialism, and the amount of research done on it shows that it has many critical views.

Said's *Orientalism*[1] and *Culture and Imperialism*[2] pioneered discussions on postcolonialism and is aptly used to answer the question as to whether HOD is indeed a critique of colonialism. The Orientalism that is pictured by Said is very ugly, however Conrad's orientalist text does not follow exactly the formula that has been shown to us by Said. Conrad produces images of a futile colonialism, an act that destroys its perpetrators. Kurtz is an example of that. His death gives us evidence that Conrad does not approve of colonialism nor does he advocate it. He sees it as degrading and a waste of man power. Thus, it can be concluded that HOD is a critique of colonialism although it does not depict the act as ugly as has been portrayed by Said.

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