

COLONIAL DISCOURSE REVISITED: *HEART OF DARKNESS*¹

THAÏS FLORES NOGUEIRA DINIZ

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
tfndiniz@terra.com.br

Colonial discourse usually refers to the writing which runs from five hundred years, through the days of European mercantile expansion, to our own time. In this paper, however, the term is used in reference to the literature written in English, but confined to the century of British Colonialism and the decades of anti- or post colonial activity which followed. Within the scope of colonial literature in general, both Colonial literature and Colonialist literature will be mentioned. The first refers specifically to colonial self-perceptions written in the Metropolis, and the second, to the literature whose preoccupation was the colonial expansion, written by European colonizers to colonized peoples, about non-European lands dominated by them. This last kind of literature was informed by theories which concerned the superiority of European culture and the rightness of the Empire.

Postcolonial discourse, as a following trend to Colonialist Literature, written in order to scrutinize the colonial relationship, sets out to resist colonialist perspectives but also to undertake a reshaping of dominant meanings, undercutting thematically and formally the discourse

In terms of language, knowledge and self-perception, there was an attempt, on the part of the colonized, to find words not only to express their voice but to describe their sense of being. It was the great age of resistance, when the colonized writer began to write freely against the Empire, giving way to Nationalist Literatures. Emerging after the Second World War, they represented both the literature written in rejection of Imperialism, and the beginnings of the process of decolonization.

More recently, important developments have occurred, with an expansion of the preoccupations of the rejection of the Empire, thus allowing colonized people both to contest the stereotypes to which they have always been reduced, and to express their view of a world distorted and made incredible by cultural displacement. Their writings can be read as endorsing a democratic vision of multicultural mixing and individual self-expression, incorporating a discourse with hybrid characteristics in which a combination of elements such as the supernatural, local legends and the imagery derived from colonialist cultures represented societies repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation and political corruption.

Although *Heart of Darkness* was written at the turn of the century, it illustrates not only a writing endowed **with** the constraints of the time in which it is inserted, and therefore, with the spirit of the age but also **with** symptoms, tendencies and concerns of the colonial and/or postcolonial discourse which would evolve throughout this century.

Heart of Darkness was serialized in *Blackwood's Magazine* from February to April 1899 and then in *Living Age* from June to August 1900. Only in 1902 was it published as a book. This period coincided with the "Scramble of Africa", when the British tended to see themselves as superior to other people, and Africa as the center of evil, as a part of the world possessed of demonic darkness or barbarism, represented by slavery, human sacrifice and cannibalism which it was their duty to exorcise. This view came as a result of the myth of the "Dark Continent", according to which Africa demanded imperialization on moral, religious and scientific grounds. In other words, Africa was, ideologically speaking, — through a discourse that treats its subject as universally accepted, scientifically established — inferior. This colonialist bias could be exemplified by Marlowe's position, at the beginning of the story, when he considered the trip as something useful, and even patriotic. Although this point is sometimes controversial, his words seem to illustrate his acceptance of Imperialism as natural when he states that "[the company] was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody [he] mets was full of it. They were going to run an oversea empire", he says, "and make no end of coin by trade".

But even being accused of showing the biases common to his age, Joseph Conrad was halfway ahead of his contemporaries when he aims at depicting the colonialist experience as something evil. Marlow suspects that he will become acquainted with a "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly", a fact that is confirmed when he comes upon

colonizers— whether Belgium, English or French— on colonized people. But it also represents a step beyond Colonialist Literature, almost a piece of postcolonial literature in the sense that it scrutinizes the colonial relationship when it serves the purpose of a self-mirror. This happens throughout the whole story of the journey towards the darkness of Africa — where the myth of the “Dark Continent” fits perfectly— which, according to Albert Guerard, is a metaphor for a journey within, a journey towards the unconscious. This self-discovery happens as the journey proceeds. First, as mentioned, before Marlow identifies the colonizer behaviour in the chiefs of the stations who ill-treated the natives by chaining them and forcing them into slave labor. As far as Marlow penetrates into the unknown, he becomes more and more conscious of this until he reaches “some lightless region of subtle horrors”, Kurtz’s place. What becomes the great achievement in the novel is that Conrad does not separate the two issues — the Colonialism, and self-knowledge— for Marlow’s story implies that the kind of world men make for themselves and for others results from their individual behaviour”. We can always look into ourselves by facing the colonizer’s behaviour.

In addition to the colonial attitudes towards Africa and Imperialism mentioned above, Conrad went a step further in working on the colonial relationship: Marlow symbolizes the complexity of human behaviour and the impossibility of remaining untainted by evil; he appears as if he is delivering the terrible message that one cannot serve Colonialism without being corrupted, even if one doesn’t quite see the motives behind it. So, the encounter between Kurtz and Marlow can be seen as a symbolic encounter with one’s own consciousness, for both characters have been tainted by Colonialism. Their encounter seems like a reflection on the mirror and the consequent suffering derived from it. As Sarvan points out, the study of *Heart of Darkness* is an examination of the West itself (285), and functions like a mirror, showing colonialism in the process of subjugating the other, its own mirror image. With this purpose, Conrad inverts the metaphor of darkness, demonstrating that the darkness is in London as well as in Brussels, and insisting that the Belgian Congo is initially a blank spot, implying that the darkness— as a metaphor and as practice— came with colonial occupation. By granting Kurtz a momentary awareness and presenting Marlow as a mediator, Conrad shows that the transformation of the conscious objectives of Colonialism into the unconscious, described through Kurtz’s degeneration, is mediated by the conqueror’s infinite power. Kurtz is trapped by his own self-image (JanMohamed, 70-71). For, when the whites penetrated the heart of darkness, in the belief that they would discover only lust and depravity, cannibalism and devil worship, embodied by the blacks, they always found, as a central figure, an astonished white face staring back: their own image.

Marlow’s story is thus a retelling of a spiritual voyage of self discovery which provides him with a finding of himself and with the horror that his self-knowledge brings to him. When Marlow reaches the “Inner station”, he

brutes are the savages or the colonizers—it does it consciously, associating Africa with the inhuman violence of the slave trade, through pre-determined, and therefore biased, images of Africa, even when he tries to denounce Colonialism. At the same time, the conflict is also mine: I cannot refrain from recognizing in Conrad's discourse that ambivalent attitude of someone who hopes and believes in a kind of transformation.

What we cannot forget, however, is that *Heart of Darkness* was published as a book in 1902, and Conrad must be exempt from this guilt. He was only a man of his age, an age in which colonizer's moral authority was justified, and imperial ideology perpetuated. The writer could not be entirely free from the colonialist mentality that he reveals and the book thus seems to be perfectly inserted in its age, reflecting the constraints of its time.

NOTES

- 1 This paper was presented at the INTERNATIONAL JOSEPH CONRAD CONFERENCE. Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland, September 1996.
- 2 Brantlinger divides the discourse in *Heart of Darkness* into two kinds: abolitionist and propaganda discourses.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa". In: Kimbrough, Robert. (ed) *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, A Norton Critical edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988. pp. 251-261.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. "Victorians and Africans: the Genealogy of the "dark Continent". In: _____. *Rules of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. pp. 173-198.

in contemporary criticism. New York; Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1989. pp. 237-255.

Young, Robert. "The ambivalence of Bhabha". In: ———. *White Mythologies: writing History and the West*. London: Routledge, 1990. pp.141-211.

Willy, Todd G. "Measures of the Heart of the Darkness: Conrad and the suicides of the 'New Imperialism'". *Conradiana* 14 (1982): 189-198.