

Aestheticizing Colonial Violence in Conrad's *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness***Hind Fouad Shahin Hindi (PhD)**

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Abstract: In *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900), Joseph Conrad captures the attempt of colonial rhetoric to rationalize, even aestheticize, colonial violence. In both works, Conrad reproduces colonial rhetoric and brings to the limelight discursive elements which rationalize acts of violence against the native inhabitants of invaded lands by establishing a connection between these acts of violence and a higher ideal that pertains to the larger myth of the civilizing mission and the white man's moral responsibility towards humanity—drawing on an inventory of racial values and ideas which give primacy to a European worldview and undermine the humanity and moral value of the Other. The objective is to make agreeable and more bearable the whole colonial ordeal, especially the need to brute force in colonized lands whenever the European project is met with resistance. Primarily, the aesthetic of violence is an interpretation which aims at reshaping the political and social mindset of men and women involved in the colonial project so that the career of colonial aggression is both endurable and enduring and the colonial project advances.

Keywords: The aesthetic of violence, colonial rhetoric, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad, violence as ideology

Despite the controversy over Joseph Conrad's position as a colonialist or anticolonial writer,¹ his fiction captures the heart of the colonial self and articulates its mindset. Conrad's writings on European colonialism bring to life characters inspired by his imperial world. These characters, then, find themselves in fictional settings and situations where the colonial self, which the colonial experience has forged over the years, finds expression in artistic forms. Of the many virtues of Conrad's literature on European imperialism, one is particularly relevant to this essay, namely, his reproduction of colonial rhetoric and its attempt to go beyond the rationalization of colonial violence under the pretext of the white man's historical responsibility. In the following pages, I will argue that in his treatment of the moral pretext in relation to violence, Conrad captures the attempt of colonial discourse to aestheticize the violence that came to characterize colonial expansion by ascribing to it a moral significance that transforms it into an ideology.

¹ In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Chinua Achebe condemns the novella for being racist and poorly authored. Conversely, Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* observes that it is a great narrative in which Conrad explores the poetics and politics of imperialism, revealing to the world the complexity of an imperialist worldview.

In “The Moral Conditions for Genocide in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,” Michael Lackey maintains that the fluidity and inconsistency of Conrad's stance on morality in his fiction, which readers, he observes, have often misunderstood (2005, p. 21), suggests his distrust of political powers which manipulate, interpret and capitalize on moral values to justify their acts of oppression and injustice against less powerful Others. Lackey primarily explores genocide in the *Heart of Darkness*, and concludes that functionaries of the empire, namely Kurtz, set up a system in which crimes against the native inhabitants are a moral necessity. This, Abdul R. JanMohamed argues, is the very role of the Manichean allegory in colonialist fiction. Manichean representations, which promote an extreme form of binary opposition between the civilized European and the uncivilized, brute Other, are in complicity with imperialism, proposes JanMohamed, in that they emphasize the colonizer's moral and cultural superiority over the perceived inferiority of the natives which, in turn, serves to “justify the social function of the dominant class and to idealize its acts of protection and responsibility” (1985, p. 72).

In *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900), Conrad brings to the limelight discursive elements in colonial discourse which connect violence to a higher ideal. In situations where the narrative involves violence, the novels reproduce colonial rhetoric as it reframes acts of violence against the native inhabitants of invaded lands by establishing a connection to an abstract value. The added moral value characteristically pertains to the larger myth of the civilizing mission, that same mission regarding which Sartre observes, “let it be understood that nobody reproaches us with having been false to such-and-such a mission—for the very good reason that we had no mission at all” (1966, p. 22). As such, Conrad represents the aestheticizing of violence in colonial discourse as an instance of colonial poetics which foregrounds a moral justification in order to make more appealing the brutal and inhumane nature of the colonial presence. This connection, however, rests on ersatz and confused reasoning.

In the last part of *Lord Jim*, the narrator, Marlow, transforms an act of unnecessary violence against the natives into an act of moral significance, albeit marred by man's baser motives. He recounts an episode in which a European pirate, Brown, invades Patusan, an island of which Englishman Jim has become lord owing to his colonial and racial privileges. After futile attempts to bring the native population to submission, Brown eventually decides to leave the island. At that juncture, Jim crafts one of the most puzzling turning points of the narrative; although on the verge of victory, Jim concedes a safe exist to Brown and his invading army. However, just as the pirate arrives to safety, he breaches the agreement and orders his men to shoot at the unsuspecting army of natives camping at the shore. Here, Marlow, the colonialist, establishes a moral value to the massacre:

Thus, Brown balanced his account with the evil fortune. Notice that even in this awful outbreak there is a superiority as of a man carries right - the abstract thing - within the envelope of his common desires. It was not a vulgar and treacherous massacre; it was a lesson, a retribution - a demonstration of some obscure and awful attribute of our nature which, I am afraid, is not so very far under the surface as we like to think. (1900, pp. 281-2)

Marlow's opening statement here depicts the incident as a complex act whose motives and significance pertain to an inner attribute of the colonial self, the individual as well as the collective. The account moves away from the actual occurrence to the realm of the abstract by associating the "awful outbreak" with a mysterious sense of the rightfulness of Brown's response; therefore, even in his unnecessary show of power, which indeed is "vulgar and treacherous," he retains a moral superiority. Meanwhile, Marlow undermines the fact that Brown has initiated the aggression on the island and has violated the agreement; moreover, he reframes the attack as "a lesson, a retribution." Yet, a retribution upon whom and for what violated right? What right does Marlow suggest Brown has? A racial right, perhaps, which demands recognition and submission on the part of the native inhabitants. Or is it a lesson intended for the resisting natives? Marlow invokes the abstract and obscure metaphysics which characterizes the attempt to romanticize violence and leaves the matter unsettled.

Marlow's commentary on the massacre is significant, not only because it rationalizes an act of unnecessary violence and treachery due to its relation to imperialism, but also because of the nature of the rationale itself. This mode of reasoning is an example of the aesthetic which Terry Eagleton examines closely in "The Ideology of the Aesthetic." Eagleton argues that the aesthetic, as its inventor Alexander Baumgarten originally intended it to signify,² is a mode of knowing which constructs a connection between the concrete and the abstract; it denotes an imagined traverse between the sensory world and the pseudo world of thought and feeling. Essentially, the aesthetic is a form of cognition which entails a connection between general ideals and specific elements or incidents from the sensory world (1988, p. 327).

Eagleton explores the aesthetic as interpretation in the realm of culture, as "a whole program of social, psychical and political reconstruction on the part of the early European bourgeoisie" (1988, p. 327). He extends the aesthetic beyond the domain of art; the concept denotes not only the beautiful in art, but also the "agreeable" in the cultural experience of a society (1988, p. 330). Therefore, he argues that "manners" and "civilized conduct" in the eighteenth century constitute instances in which ethics and the dictates of a particular society are aestheticized (1988, p. 329). Civilized conduct is a combination of social moral standards and individual style, it involves the careful and continuous disciplining of the body and the self until moral standards become style, that is, until the practice is no longer forced or affected but is natural and spontaneous. The aesthetic, therefore, engages with our reactions, in the form of "affections and aversions" (1988, p. 328), to the material world, and as such it assumes the power to inform our taste regarding acts, manners and demands made upon us in the social and political spheres. By manufacturing such interpretations, the apparatus of power can interfere with the political attitude of a society, and can reframe "imperatives" so that they are more "agreeable". It is precisely for the crucial role it plays in politics that Eagleton correlates the aesthetic as interpretation with power: "What matters in aesthetics is not art but this whole project of

² Terry Eagleton's central argument in "The Ideology of the Aesthetic" rests on the understanding that the aesthetic denotes a distinction between the material and the immaterial for its inventor Alexander Baumgarten, as opposed to the more modern distinction between life and art.

reconstructing the human subject from the inside, informing its subtlest affections and bodily responses with this law which is not a law" (1988, p. 330).

Similarly, Marlow's colonial rhetoric resorts to the aesthetic to make agreeable and more bearable the whole colonial ordeal. The horror of the massacre is undermined through association with an abstract value (in Brown's case it is racial superiority or moral equity), which reproduces the assault as retribution, as a deserved retaliation that justly balances scores. And as far as the European imperialist is concerned, it restores racial pride, which, perhaps, is the "awful attribute of our nature" which Marlow blames for the violent outbreak. Racial pride serves as an ideal in colonial discourse, for it protects the moral advancement of humanity. It is informed by the ideology that colonialism is a mission, in the main, morally oriented. It has its justification and authority in its connection to morality, to the white man's racial duty of serving the rest of humanity and of contributing to its progress at all means and costs.

Ironically, the power of the aesthetic resides in its false reasoning; although it is chiefly an interpretation, that is, a historical construct, it gives the pretense to natural and inherent categories. Eagleton observes that the aesthetic "partakes in the perfection of reason" by connecting "the generalities of reason" to "the particulars of sense" (1988, p. 328). The connection is, nonetheless, tenuous for it lacks the sound basis which logic or science depend on. It follows, then, that the aesthetic as a mode of cognition is confused and inferior to logic, thus contends Eagleton (1988, p. 328). Marlow's commentary on the massacre is, again, a good example: Marlow suggests an invisible link between an act of mass murder and some abstract ideal that justifies it as retribution, even more as a lesson. The link which he suggests is contingent; the progress from the incident to the abstract is arbitrary, yet it appeals to a value that finds resonance in the colonial self. The aesthetic as interpretation lacks the solid foundations and premises upon which logic is founded; it stretches reason so that it brings together disparate elements to forge a unity that rests on mere juxtaposition. Therefore, it rightfully falls in the domain of the produced as opposed to the inherent. That the connection is inherent, natural and spontaneous, however, is the false impression Marlow's discursive rhetoric attempts to convey.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, once again, articulates the aesthetic of violence in the context of colonial expansion. On the deck of the *Nellie*, which was anchored at the mouth of the Thames, Marlow, assuming a preaching-Buddha pose (which, perhaps, alludes to the moral pretext of the colonial endeavor), identifies with the early Roman invaders of Britain. In a stream-of-consciousness segment of the narrative, in which he attempts to rationalize why the Romans must have found themselves compelled to resort to violence, he observes:

'They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. 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. 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....' (1899, p. 1961)

With his own people's colonial history in mind, Marlow interprets violence as an inevitable course of action to eradicate darkness, that darkness which envelopes the world of other people who have a different worldview and are endowed with a different complexion. Marlow's perspective on combating darkness evidently rests on the economy of the Manichean representation of the other, which depicts the other as inherently evil and living in utter darkness and waste. To defeat such evil darkness, the only effective measure is brute force, and even though it should give no occasion for pride, for it is conditioned by the accidental weakness of the adversaries, it is, nevertheless, necessary. Not only does Marlow's colonial rhetoric rationalize violence, but it also plays a trick of evasion: the legitimacy of robbery and violence against "those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" is not at all the issue of interest; instead, it is the legitimacy of taking pride in one's power against a weak rival which he emphasizes. Consequently, an inferior question of taking pride in one's power downplays the universally significant moral question of conquering the lands of those who have a different worldview which the conquerors deem evil.

The aesthetic is a fine example of an ideology that matured into hegemony: it "marks a shift from what we might now, in Gramscian terms, call coercion to hegemony, ruling and informing our sensuous life from within while allowing it to thrive in all its relative autonomy" (1988, p. 328). Marlow acknowledges his racial prejudice and admits that violence, which is informed by that racial prejudice, is "not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Hence the power of the idea which "redeems" the act, and transforms the whole of the colonial project into a career, which allows colonial agents to dedicate their effort to perfecting their performance instead of questioning its legitimacy. As a result, "robbery with violence" and "aggravated murder on a great scale" become part of a performance which requires mastery and skill. Firm belief in the idea, that the work has its just motives in a moral quest which ultimately would contribute to the progress of humanity, constitutes a refuge. It is the same refuge that sheltered Kurtz and helped him endure the horror which he himself created.

Eagleton emphasizes the aesthetic as a program of "psychical reconstruction" (1988, p. 327), similarly, the psychological transformation which the colonial project has wrought on both colonizer and colonized has been the focus of much research in the field of postcolonial studies. Colonialism must have been a hard ordeal for the white man to have him reframe and propagate its atrocities as aesthetic: the horrors that have proven to be essential for the imperial expansion caused severe damage to one's sense of humanity, which the aesthetic proved necessary to endure. Conrad captures the subtleties of the psychological transformation under colonial rule and the poetics to aestheticize it in another stream-of-consciousness moment for Marlow:

You said also - I call to mind - that "giving your life up to them" (*them* meaning all of mankind with skins brown, yellow, or black in color) "was like selling your soul to a brute." You contended that "that kind of thing" was only endurable and enduring when

based on a firm conviction in the truth of ideas racially our own, in whose name are established the order, the morality of an ethical progress. "We want its strength at our back," you had said. "We want a belief in its necessity and its justice, to make a worthy and conscious sacrifice of our lives. Without it the sacrifice is only forgetfulness, the way of offering is no better than the way to perdition." (1900, pp. 235-6)

That the soul is lost in the process of colonial expansion is a recurrent theme in colonial literature, and making that loss "endurable and enduring" requires the transformative power of ideas. Marlow, in the previous excerpt from *Lord Jim*, reiterates the colonial argument that the imperial quest is a necessary sacrifice made by Europeans to salvage humanity. What makes the lives spent in the colonized lands a worthy sacrifice is the firm belief in "ideas racially our own": that the white man's work in the colonies ultimately and collectively contributes to the "ethical progress" and welfare of mankind.

The aesthetic as interpretation in a colonial context is exclusive to a unique worldview. The inventory of ideas which aesthetic cognition in the colonial mindset draws on is uniquely racial, and, going back to the economy of the Manichean representation, it belongs to a worldview which perceives itself as superior to all other worldviews for its strong inclination to morality. Colonial rhetoric promotes firm belief in such narratives in order to advance the colonial project. Marlow suggests that the Romans, who "were men enough to face the darkness" (1899, p. 1960), must have drawn strength from such deep-seated convictions during their invasion of Britain, which too was a place of darkness. As a son of the civilized world he finds himself sympathetic towards these civilized men of Rome, who found themselves suddenly surrounded by the savagery, wilderness and wretchedness of a land so remote from the center of civilization. "Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay - cold, fog, tempests, diseases, exile, and death - death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here" (1899, p. 1960). Yet, the sense of sacrifice and the belief in the worthiness of the quest allowed them to endure and conquer.

It is worth noting, however, that chief intellectuals in Europe challenged such discursive efforts. Sartre, for example, deconstructs the narrative of a morally oriented colonial career, and by doing so he also deconstructs the aesthetic of violence. He attacks European humanism which informs the idea of a moral quest in the colonized territories and declares it a false and racist ideology. For Sartre, European humanism has proven to be "nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification of pillage; its honeyed words, its affectation of sensibility were only alibis for our aggressions" (1966, p. 21). He laments that "with us [Europeans] there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters" (1966, p. 22).

In *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, Conrad exposes colonial rhetoric by emphasizing the discursive elements used to aestheticize violence in the colonial experience. The aesthetic of violence is primarily an interpretation which aims at reshaping the political and social mindset of men and women involved in the colonial project, so that the hardships of colonial aggression become more bearable and the colonial project advances. To achieve the desired effect, the

aesthetic of violence draws on an inventory of racial values and ideas which gives primacy to a European worldview. It falls back on the metanarrative of the civilizing mission and European humanism, which equate a western worldview with morality, justice, and ethical progress. Reframing violence as an endurable and bearable act under the pretext that it would ultimately serve the progress of mankind is an ideology which has the false quality of emerging out of one's inherent moral sense, hence the power of the aesthetic of violence in colonial discourse.

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