

The Dark Side of Human Nature—An Exploration of “*Heart of Darkness*” in the Light of Orientalism

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This thesis focuses on the dark side of human nature implied in the novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902) by Joseph Conrad (1857–1924). The dark side of human nature finds its ready expression in the cruel oppression and exploitation of the colonialists or imperialists. Kurtz, the main character in the novel, is characterized by his greed for material gain and power, his cruel behavior towards the natives, his sense of superiority to the marginalized, and his dominance in discourse over the colonial people. So Kurtz can be viewed as a representative of the colonialists or imperialists, who concentratedly illustrates the dark side of human nature. The interpretation and analysis of the novel in this paper is grounded on the theory of post-colonialism proposed by Edward Said whose key concepts in his *Orientalism* and strategy of deconstruction through discourse revolution can be applied to the discovery of the true nature of the imperialists and colonialism.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Orientalism, human nature, dark side

Introduction

Heart of Darkness has been viewed as one of the greatest of Joseph Conrad's stories (CHEN, 1990, p. 167), which shows the author's great humanity and his unreserved horror at the crimes committed by the colonists and imperialists all over the world, in spite of his aristocratic inclinations and his essential conservatism. According to *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (Vol. 1) published by Gale Research Company, Henry James (1843–1916) figures that Conrad is a great writer, and his success lies at his unprecedented writing skills, especially pointing out the narrator Marlow, his omniscient point of view. When Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) analyzes Conrad's works, she says Conrad is romantic, and figures his dual personality. In her opinion, Conrad is combined with two definitely different characters: One is the sea captain who is simple, loyal, and secret; the other is Marlow who is careful, good at analysis and speech.

Heart of Darkness is a story of adventure told by a sailor named Marlow. The story begins with a cruising yawl the *Nellie* anchored on the Thames. The yawl will head for Africa, along the Congo River. “And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth” (Conrad, 1983, p. 8). Marlow begins to tell the story. On the way, Marlow continuously hears about a white agent Mr. Kurtz who is said to be a genius. But he finally finds that actually Kurtz is a cold-blooded colonist. He makes the local people slaves, takes them for nothing. And he plunders the ivory crazily. At the end of the story, we see the real nature of Kurtz and the real purpose of the novel. In fact, Kurtz is greedy, cruel, and attempting to devour everything. It is necessary to discuss the dark side of human nature from the main character Kurtz. Before it, Orientalism will be introduced briefly.

Introduction About the Orientalism

Edward Said (1935–2003), as a significant figure in Orientalism studies, has published many books, and the representative books are *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, in which Said has presented a deep analysis about Orientalism.

There are three levels in the definition of Orientalism. First, generally, it refers to an academic study about oriental societies from the West. This research objects not only include the academic works, but also the travel notes by travelers, explorers, and businessmen, and novels or poems about the Orient. These researchers are called Orientalists. Second, it is a style of thought based on the binary oppositions made between “the Orient” and “the Occident”. Said calls it “binarism”. In Orientalist’s writing, it is conventional to separate the oriental and the occidental. For example, there are the binary oppositions between “we” and “the other”, “ours” and “theirs”. Edward Said argues that the opposition between “our” world and “theirs” always implies that “our” world is superior to “theirs”. In Orientalist’s eye, the West is rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, and capable of holding real values and dominating the world. But the Orient has nothing to do with these merits. They are uncultured, foolish, poor, and without the ability to realize their history and to cultivate themselves. So it is the West’s mission to control the Orient, and help their development. Said argues that this thinking pattern is one of the most important reason leading to the distortion and uglification to the Orient. Third, it is “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient”, or “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Kennedy, 2000, pp. 21-24). In Said’s opinion, Orientalism has been taken as a basic principle to control the Orient from late eighteenth century on. The West describes, formulates, judges, teaches, and looks down on the Orient. Then they invade, control, and reconstruct the Orient. This is the disgusting power mechanism in discourse (Kennedy, 2000, pp. 21-24). The following part will analyze the dark side of human nature embodied in the main character Kurtz based on the essence of Orientalism.

The Evil Nature Embodied in Kurtz’s Character

Based on the definition of Orientalism, there are two aspects in its essence. First, it is the binary oppositions in thinking pattern. They think the West is normal and the Orient is abnormal. For example, the British writer Edward William Lane has presented a vivid description about Egypt in his famous book *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836). He wrote a young man split his abdomen on a ceremonious wedding ceremony. He put out all his gut, and put it on a silver tray. After the ceremony, he put it back. It is very abnormal to do such a thing. This is the description about the Orient of British writer. So do some French writers, such as Gustave Flaubert (Said, 1978, p. 111). Such abnormal things are rare to see in oriental countries. But the Western writers like to write it at full length. Orientalists purposely show that the West is normal, understandable, and reasonable; while the Orient is abnormal, strange, and inconceivable. Their logic is binary opposition. No matter when they mention the orient, they will describe it as the opposition of the West. Said criticizes these extreme views seriously. This is just the West’s own wishful thinking. This is unfair to the orient.

The main hero Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* is mainly narrated and viewed by Marlow and others. Marlow firstly heard about it as a “universal genius” (Conrad, 1983, p. 83), who is almost worshipped as a god. He speaks fluent English and has received good education in Europe. He is so excellent and he comes to Congo with noble intentions. But at the end of Marlow’s quest, he finds that Kurtz is the lusty and violent devil in

Congo. He acts as a thief, murderer, raider, persecutor, and the local people see him as disease. As a leader of colonists, Kurtz has done too much evil in Congo. For example, he even beats the men who compete with him in ivory business into death. He acts not like a civilized person at all.

Kurtz's degeneration and corruption are due to the essence of colonists to some extent. According to Said's *Orientalism*, the West people take their superiority for granted. So in Kurtz's opinion, they are rational and capable, while the local people are strange and stupid. It is his own mission to civilize the people in Congo. With the idea of binary opposition, Kurtz looks the local people as animals, and tries to govern them in his way. Sometimes, he plays the role of God, and tries to civilize them.

Marlow cites one quotation from Kurtz's words:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived, must necessarily appear to them (savages) in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity, and so on, and so on. By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded, etc, etc. (Conrad, 1983, p. 50)

Implicit in this paragraph is the danger of man playing the role of God. This is one dark aspect of Kurtz's ideology; he thinks himself a God, but looks down upon the local people. For Kurtz, the dominant ideology of their time, just as the Orientalists pointed, is binary opposition, which is to see Africa as a primitive, mysterious, and dark continent peopled by inferior savages for centuries behind Europeans in social and moral evolution. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad tries to explore wider and deeper into racial and cultural problems. The material essence of all races is the same. But the Europeans always think they are superior and more civil. They have efficiency and more good ideas. So it is their responsibility to save and redeem the Africans. In this way, they are arrogant, and they look down upon the local people. Taking the local people as the inferior, the colonists treat them as animals, and force them to do anything for them.

The second essence of *Orientalism* is power mechanism of discourse. Early in sixteenth century, British philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626) had searched after the relation between knowledge and power. He concludes that knowledge is power. Then, the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) investigated the relation between knowledge and power deeply. In Gramsci's opinion, knowledge produces power; power is one important feature of knowledge. Cultural domination and hegemony is to possess the culture leadership. If one class possessed the culture leadership, they could carry on cultural hegemony. Gramsci's theory of culture leadership is one of the important sources of Said's *Orientalism*. But the most direct and important influence to Said is Foucault's theory. Foucault argues that all knowledge has a close relationship with power. Knowledge is the product of power. Power is the essence of knowledge, and exists in the knowledge. Said had said he benefited so much from Foucault. Based on the theories of Bacon, Gramsci and Foucault, Said thinks there is dense power color in the knowledge of *Orientalism*, after he analyzes the books of *Orientalism* in details. He argues that politics has a great impact on knowledge and civic culture. He also considers that scholars are influenced by the local political environment deeply. Sometimes they are unconscious, sometimes out of conscious (Said, 1978, p. 343). Especially the scholars of *Orientalism*, some of them have direct relations with government. Governments provide financial assistance to them to carry on their research. So they speak for government, and become hack writer of colonialism and imperialism. To some extent, in *Orientalism*, politics is the essence of knowledge. Knowledge is the product of power; more power requires more knowledge. When the West people master more knowledge than the orient, they possess greater power.

As well-educated Europeans, colonists always find good excuses to cover their evil thoughts and behaviors. In the course of colonization, colonists say they are to help the local people, and they try to civilize them. But actually, they plunder the colonies, pillage the ivory, and bully the local people. The local people, who are lack of education, sometimes are unclear about the real purpose of colonists, and are cheated by them. Under such a direction of public opinion from the Western governments, European scholars are also influenced by the local political environment, consciously, or unconsciously. So they speak for the government. Since colonists master more knowledge than the local people in Congo, they possess greater power. So Kurtz hopes to control Congo, while the hope drives him mad. Here, Kurtz, representing the colonists, possessed the power of discourse or the cultural leadership.

Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is described as a "mad" soul with a "clear" mind. Kurtz's transgression by his will to power is not an abrupt departure from his original idealism, but an exemplification of imperialistic morality. With a clear mind and mad soul, Kurtz is dangerous. He represents the European brutalization of Africa. When Kurtz says: "My intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my..." (Conrad, 1983, p. 116). Even the reader cannot help laughing at his desires.

Kurtz, as the incarnation of colonialism, manifests the dark side of human nature intensively. He takes himself as someone superior, and the Congo local people inferior. He claims to be a civilized person, but cruel towards the marginalized. He is greedy for ivory and all sorts of wealth. In order to realize his material dream, he became more and more greedy. Along with it, he brings not only a lot of harm to the local people, but also his own doom.

Ways to Solve the Problems

Originally, the Europeans have prejudice to the local people. Taking this kind of prejudice, they arrive in Africa. The Africans are also afraid of the Europeans; they dare not get near to them. So they become only black shadows in the whites' eye. Consequently, the whites fear the blacks. They misunderstand the local people and think them as something dangerous. So they decide to exterminate all the brutes to avoid danger. In a word, the local people are inferior in the Europeans' mind. The communication between the two is completely a failure.

How to solve the problem? In Said's study, only deconstructing the binary opposition and Western culture hegemony can the false of the Orientalism be proved.

Firstly, it is to deconstruct the binary opposition. The traditional philosophy is the binary opposition, which believes such opposite concepts as center and periphery, normal and abnormal, truth and false, present and absence, etc. In Said's opinion, the binary opposition is the philosophical base of the Orientalist. Orientalists write their books in such a thinking pattern. To change their thinking pattern, it is necessary to deconstruct their philosophical base. And then they can reconstruct the theory, and make it beyond the master-slave binary dialectic. Although Orientalists used to separate the West and the east purposely, the West and the East cannot be separated totally. They have something in common actually. They may complement each other, so do their culture.

Secondly, it is to deconstruct the essence of objects. This is also an important way of Said's Orientalism. Said argues that in the Orientalists' books, the essence of the oriental people are stupid, lazy, irrational, and mess in mind, whether the aged or the young, men or women. This is to abstract such a false essence from so many specific and lovely oriental people. He disagrees with this opinion. Said points out that there is nothing

essential and nothing never to be changed. Everything is changeable (Said, 1993, p. 215). The West should not take the oriental people as something stupid forever. They are developing. And they have many merits which the Orientalists may not find before. There is no eternal essence in it.

One reason of Europeans' brutality is that they do not understand the local people, because they are totally different races and cultures. So sometimes the local people frighten the Europeans, and then the Europeans consider them inferior more and more. For example, throughout his journey up the Congo River, Marlow feels there are unseen faces in the forests observing him. Then in a fog, it seems they are surrounded by the local cruel people, hearing their scream. Marlow is afraid and cannot understand them. So do the most Europeans clearly. Fear and failure to understand lead to the brutality of Europeans toward the native people. So a good communication is in need.

Conclusion

In the light of Orientalism, this thesis focuses on the detailed discussion about the dark side of human being embodied in the hero Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. Orientalists distort the orient and make them lose their true face. They raise the reputation of the west and lower the orient. To wipe off the disgrace, the orient must find their true face, reexamine their history, and restore the historical truth. In fact, each of them has its own advantages and disadvantages. In order to rethink human history, Said put out contrapuntal analysis. The contrapuntal analysis sees human history as different cultures intermingling with each other, not a one-way lane. So the West and the orient intertwined their histories. In Said's opinion, the world is to become a melting pot with various nations, and become a human community. His final care is the human liberation.

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