



The Production of the Imperialist Subjectivities in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Joseph Conrad portrays the imperialist ideology as fundamentally flawed in "Heart of Darkness". The inconsistency of imperialism is blatantly evident in the contradiction between the perceptions of Kurtz as "an emissary of pity" (59) and his call for genocide, which he put as a postscript in his report to the Society for the Suppression of the Savage Customs. I thus claim that "Heart of Darkness" constructs the colonizer as a flawed subject who suffers from the same contradictions with the imperialist system as its product. I will use the Lacanian theory of the symbolic order and refer to Slavoj Žižek's re-formulations of it in order to substantiate and clarify my points.

Keywords: The imperialist ideology, overdetermination, ideological interpellation, the symbolic order, the non-symbolizable kernel, unconscious fantasies, cynical reason

The Production of the Imperialist Subjectivities in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" owes its emblematic status in the history of the debates over imperialism to its haunting images of brutal exploitation of Africa. "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..." says Marlow, at the beginning of his narrative as he introduces his theme of "the conquest of the earth" (34). Yet, by the end of it, we are appalled by the rapaciousness as well as the futility and waste of the European colonial rule in Africa. His experiences in Congo give Marlow enough reason to be skeptical about bringing civilization to the 'uncivilized' parts of the world. While he laughs right in the face of the colonial pretense of 'the civilizing work,' he does not, however, hide his fascination with Kurtz, whose call for genocide stands as an abomination. The modernist interpretations of "Heart of Darkness" that have dealt with the Marlowian paradox have pointed out Conrad's moral ambiguity. The modernist critics are divided over the issue whether Conrad exposes the ills of European colonialism or reinforces the centrality of Europe by representing Africa as the uncivilized Other. Some of these critics have argued that Conrad is hardly critical of imperialism, neither is Marlow since both are Eurocentrists. Some have contended that although Conrad debunks the imperialist arguments of bringing civilization, he believes in the benevolence of the British imperialism. Some critics have been, however, convinced of Marlow's anti-imperialism, although they point to his confusion about Kurtz; whether he is a monster or an idealist. My aim, in this paper, is to reconsider the ambiguities of Conrad's work from the anti-subjectivist and anti-humanist perspective of the poststructuralist Marxists. I, therefore, propose to read the imperialist contradictions exposed in "Heart of Darkness" as reflections of a world structured by shifting and flexible elements of ideology and power, which further determine the colonizers' thoughts and actions. In order to clarify the ways in which Conrad defies totalizing, essentializing, and one-dimensional views of imperialism, I have recourse to Louis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek's theories of ideology and subjectivity. Emphasizing the Althusserian concepts of "overdetermination" and "interpellation" of the subjects, I further draw from Slavoj Žižek's re-formulation of ideology after Lacan's Symbolic and finally, endeavour to demonstrate how the inconsistencies of imperialism reflect the overdetermined character of the colonial reality in Conrad.

Conrad's representations of the intense disillusionment with the oppressive colonial system in Africa and his equally intense efforts for maintaining the imperialist deception stimulated divergent responses, ranging from reproach to praise to his work. The apex of the twentieth century modern criticism that focuses on Conrad's stance with regard to imperialism in "Heart of Darkness" is Edward Said's famous indictment of Conrad's work, charging it with reinforcing European "mastery and will" (23). Said defined Conrad's "politics and aesthetics" in "Heart of Darkness" as "imperialist" (24). Chinua Achebe's similar indictment was no less incriminatory. Achebe deplored Conrad's representation of Africa as being 'inferior' to the West, arguing that he portrayed "Africa" as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe, and therefore, of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are mocked by triumphant bestiality" (114). Some critics went so far as to accuse Conrad of moral indifference with regard to colonialism. H.M. Daleski contended that "Heart of Darkness" had been morally unresponsive to the imperialist oppression of Africa and he found its "moral nihilism" deplorable (24). Along with the views that incriminate Conrad's work for promoting the European domination of Africa, there also exist views that capitalize on the idea that Conrad was against "wasteful and selfish" imperialism. The second group maintains that Conrad condemned continental imperialism but supported the British imperialism which he considered as benevolent. Hunt Hawkins argued that Conrad condoned the British colonial methods on the grounds that they were "efficient" (286). According to Hawkins, he regarded Belgian colonialism as the worst type conducted for purely exploitative ends. Eloise Knapp Hay

agrees that Conrad's narrator, Marlow, purports to be against the theory and practice of imperialism while he sanctions British imperialism. Hay also points to the divergence of opinion between Conrad and his narrator, arguing that Conrad portrays Marlow as a typical British conservatist who considers British colonialism as benevolent for 'the inferior races.' Hay maintains that centering the average British perspective of colonization, Conrad meant to question all types of domination, including the British. Cedric Watts calls attention to Marlow's contradictory attitude: "imperialism may be redeemed by 'an idea at the back of it', but imperialism, irredeemably, is 'robbery with violence'" (47). The confusion about Conrad's stance with regard to colonialism and imperialism, or what type of colonialism he favors and what type he condemns, marks recent criticism of "Heart of Darkness." J.G. Peters maintains that "despite Marlow's withering critique of colonialism, it remains unclear whether colonialism in general is under attack or only continental colonialism—particularly Belgian colonialism" in "Heart of Darkness" (57). Peters notes that Marlow's insistence on the redeeming power of an overall purpose implies his reluctance to indict the British imperialism (57).

While numerous critics have pointed out the ambiguities underlying Conrad's work, Terry Eagleton disputed that "the ideological contradictions" of Conrad emerged from his peculiar use of fictional form to balance the hard realities of life and illusion of hope. Eagleton argued that the following represented the Conradian motto: "faith, work, and duty must not be allowed to yield to skepticism if the supreme fiction of social order is to be sustained" (139). Eagleton's commentary suggests that, like many modernist writers of his generation, Conrad was reluctant to subordinate his fiction to politics. The political implications of Conrad's work, however, have continued to arouse the interest of the critics. Ian Watt regarded the work as "an early expression of what was to become a worldwide revulsion from the horrors of Leopold's exploitation of the Congo" (139). Hunt Hawkins rejected the view that Conrad was indifferent to the political issues of his time and contended that his aim in writing "Heart of Darkness" was to take the buzzwords, 'the civilizing mission' and 'efficiency,' popularized by his contemporaries—like Rudyard Kipling—to task. Hawkins maintained that the shallow perspectives on imperialism of his day gave enough reason to Conrad for questioning the biases and platitudes concerning the issue (288). As Gillen notes, at the time Conrad produced his work, the "sense of futility and disgust began to haunt European consciousness in the late imperial period," thereby it was hard to remain unresponsive to the question of imperialism (105). Daniel Schwarz also emphasizes Conrad's disappointment with the ideological blindness about imperialism and claims that he set out to expose the imperialist deceit of 'the civilizing work': "*Heart of Darkness* debunks the concept of the white man's burden and shows how the concept of empire is a sham" (67). Although critics agree that the effects of the pervasive disillusionment with the imperialist plunder resonate in Conrad's work, some use caution against passing conclusive judgments on his moral take on colonialism. The ambiguities of "Heart of Darkness" thus support divergent responses, but at the same time, provide the profundity Andrea White credits Conrad's works with. White considers Conrad's works as "profound studies of the imperial situation in late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century" (180).

Locating the ambiguities of "Heart of Darkness" in the moral constitution of the characters or in its author's moral perspective indeed suggests an unappreciation of Conrad's profundity and reduction of his vision to a totalizing and essentializing worldview. In the meanwhile, the implications of Conrad's work with regard to the symbolic overdetermination of the colonial system are gone unnoticed. What must be considered primarily is that Conrad avoids representing imperialism as a system simply based on a fearful capacity for oppression. His vision of imperialism, on the contrary, suggests a constructive symbolic mechanism that perpetuates the colonial system. In his study on the threads of skeptical thinking in Conrad, Mark Wollaeger points to the implications of an underlying symbolic structure in Conrad's works, which, he argues, reflect "the once-popular poststructuralist slogan, 'Language speaks us'" (5). Wollaeger's acknowledgement of the overdetermined nature of the colonial reality in Conrad suggests a poststructuralist shift in criticism. In his investigations into the degrees of skepticism in *Lord Jim*, Wollaeger contends that Marlow's breaking down the binary of truth and illusion suggests an autonomous symbolic system—like language—as the determining factor behind reality and subjectivity in Conrad. Similarly, the fact that Marlow meditates on the ways in which belief and speculation give the colonial reality its ultimate shape in "Heart of Darkness" evinces Conrad's interest in exploring the symbolic structure underlying this reality. "Heart of Darkness" is also centralized on the splits, binaries, conflicts, and contradictions. The major conflict it foregrounds is Marlow's slipping from a rational and skeptical perspective of the colonial conquest of Africa to an evasive world of speculation. Marlow persistently refers to a deeper and intangible reality, which determines the colonial conquest and "redeems it" (34). According to Marlow, what makes up for the colonial plunder is "an idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea" (34). His defense of the 'belief in the idea' may be seen as part of the characters' "struggles to establish a meaningful relationship between principled belief and intrusive facts" (Wollaeger 9). Yet, the fact that Marlow forms his ideas about belief in conjunction with a series of speculations about dream-sensations and the dreamy, intangible character of reality raises doubts about the resolution of such a struggle. In other words, the fact that Marlow's disillusionment with the hypocritical tenor of the colonial conquest Africa dissolves into speculative talk about belief hardly makes sense unless we understand the symbolically overdetermined character of the colonial reality in "Heart of Darkness".

Marlow's evocation of the elements of dream, absurdity, sense of unreal, and perplexion in his depictions of the colonial reality foregrounds the inconsistency, the split in the latter's heart. 'The dream-sensation' emerges as a metaphorical way of portraying the colonial system in the famous passage where Marlow addresses his listeners on the deck of *Nellie*:

It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream - making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams... (55).

The passage problematizes the colonial reality in a manner that raises questions about the colonizer's slipping into a world of fantasy. Yet, more importantly, Marlow's emphasis on the dream provides a major clue for clarifying the stance of "Heart of Darkness" with regard to the imperialist ideology. As such, the passage invites a reading together with Slavoj Žižek's "ideological fantasy" derived from his interpretation of the Lacanian Symbolic. In *The Sublime Object*, Žižek argues that "the fundamental level of ideology [...] is

not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself" (33). He, therefore, rejects Marx's formulation of ideology as 'false consciousness.' The question Žižek raises is that although the modern individual is perfectly aware of the ideological deception, he/she hardly resists it. The answer lies in the Lacanian understanding of the unconscious as symbolically overdetermined. Such symbolic overdetermination of the subject in the unconscious level entails taking the non-symbolizable kernel in the Symbolic, namely, the fundamental inconsistency, the lack, into account. Žižek argues, together with Lacan, that the subject, being a product of the Symbolic, suffers from the same fundamental inconsistency, that is, the non-symbolizable kernel, that harasses the Symbolic. In "Heart of Darkness," how the imperialist ideology functions in the unconscious level is signified by Marlow's emphasis on the dream-sensation. Marlow's map further suggests that the colonial reality is produced by the colonizer's unconscious fantasies. The map emerges as a symptom of the symbolic overdetermination of the unconscious because it clearly replaces the actual geographical region in Conrad's work. Marlow's fantasies about Africa speak through the map--the symbolic representation: "As I looked at the map of it... it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird..." (36). Africa as reality vanishes or rather, is replaced with Africa as a map. It is the map that determines the colonizer's subjectivity. That is to say, the symbolic representation of Africa suggests the ideological interpellation of Marlow, or in the Žižekian formulation, the imperialist ideology operates through the unconscious level. The map fascinates the colonizer with its promise of domination and plunder. "The biggest, the most blank" (36) space extends before Marlow's eyes, inviting him to a feast of discovery and domination.

Marlow's historical reference to the Roman invasion of England further shows how the imperialist ideology structures the colonizer's unconscious. The evocation of ancient history suggests an original trauma which has to be integrated in the symbolic signification. Žižek refers to the process of symbolization as being incomplete and argues that the symbolic structure must integrate and neutralize the original trauma. Only after the appropriation of the traumatic event, he claims, the symbolic system can establish its legitimacy and credibility. In "Heart of Darkness," the justification of the imperialist ideology depends on the symbolic appropriation of the Roman conquest of England. Marlow's invocation of the Roman legions in England serves both as an integration of the original trauma of the conquest in the symbolic system and subsequently as a justification of the colonial conquest of Africa. Marlow's historical reference shifts the status of the traumatic event from the violent plunder into 'the civilizing work.' Žižek claims that "the difference between the 'original' and its repetition... is the intervention of the signifying network in which the event is inscribed" (*Interrogating* 43). The unprecedented violence perpetrated by the Roman invaders is relevant as far as the subsequent imperialist acts are concerned since the subsequent acts of imperial domination are integrated into the process through a transition from contingency to necessity. The original trauma--the Roman invasion--disrupts the symbolic order. Marlow's invocation suggests how the disruption is normalized and neutralized by justifying the imperial domination. The first imperialist act should be experienced as a trauma so that when it is repeated it can be symbolized. Žižek calls this as "the symbolic necessity" (43). The symbolization process of the traumatic event further enables misrecognition--"*Misrecognition* of its first occurrence is 'inherent' to its symbolic necessity and an immediate constituent of its recognition" (43)--which facilitates "the emergence of the law" (Žižek 43). Marlow's reference to the imperial conquests in ancient history in "Heart of Darkness" suggests that the imperial domination becomes, as Jurgen Osterhammel deftly puts it, "the gift and grace of civilization" (110) only after being fully incorporated into the symbolic system.

The fact that the symbolically overdetermined character of subjectivity, namely, the ideological construction of the colonizers, reveals the traumas of the symbolic system pervades "Heart of Darkness." Marlow's depictions of the anxieties, fears, disturbances, aberrance, and madness that plague the colonizers suggest that the imperialist ideology is fundamentally inconsistent and flawed. Marlow's conversation with the Brussels doctor, who mysteriously warns him against the loss of control, forebodes that traumas make up an integral part of the colonial experience. Talking about "the changes" that "take place inside," the doctor inquires if there are any cases of mental disorder in Marlow's family. He subsequently refers to the instances of sudden rage, aberrance, and madness in the colonial outposts (39). In a manner that justifies the doctor, the bitter-talking Swedish captain of the little steamer in Congo refers to a company man who unexpectedly develops symptoms of despair and disturbance and kills himself. Marlow responds incredulously, "'Hanged himself? Why, in God's name?'" The captain answers: "Who knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps" (42). The instances of sudden disturbance suggest that the imperial will to domination revolves around a fundamental inconsistency. Marlow is further told how his predecessor, Fresleven, known as "the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs," (36) becomes upset over the loss of two black hens and beats the chief of the village in a sudden fit. He can only be stopped by a spear between his shoulder blades. The native inhabitants of the village, terrorized by the incident, clear out of the village: "Mad terror had scattered them, men, women, and children, through the bush, and they had never returned" (37). Such traumatic incidents as part and parcel of the colonial reality suggest Fredrick Jameson's succinct formulation of "diagnosis" which "is also its own symptom" (qtd in Žižek 2). Although Fredrick Jameson uses the formulation in order to define the contemporary social system, it can also be used for shedding light on the colonizers' traumatic experiences of the colonial conquest. Jameson conceives the social system as a matrix founded upon displacing/mediating the oppositions: "The system of possible positions is thus a dynamic scheme of all possible answers or reactions to some basic structural deadlock or antagonism" (qtd in Žižek 2). Although the system seems to require objectivity, it "can never be anything more than ideological" (qtd in Žižek 2). Slavoj Žižek argues that Jameson's system of possible positions posits a social reality, the limitations of which determine the subjective consciousness, which is itself formed by this social reality. It follows that the inconsistencies of the social reality reflect the inconsistencies of the subject and vice versa. A supreme example of such a correlation between the outer inconsistencies and the subjective consciousness takes place in "Heart of Darkness." The following passage suggests how the outer conditions shape Marlow's consciousness: "The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform somberness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion" (41). Marlow's referring to 'senseless delusion' hints at the fact that the colonizer's mind is overdetermined by the inconsistencies of imperialism. In fact, Marlow's colonial experiences make a long list of the incidents of madness, absurdity, and senselessness such that the French

warship firing at the vast and empty African shore: "There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight" (42). The warship epitomizes the inconsistent and absurd colonial system.

In Marlow's depictions, the landscape projects the colonizer's fears and anxiety, making him "feel very small, very lost" as if he is a "small, the grimy beetle crawled on" (63). Marlow feels as if he is "cut off from the comprehension of surroundings" (63). His depictions signify the unmediated correlation between the colonizers' subjective consciousness and the African landscape. The complete dissolution of subjectivity is also related with the landscape: "we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse" (63). Such effects of the landscape on the mind reveal the symbolic overdetermination of the colonizer's subjectivity; the fact that the colonizer is overdetermined by the inconsistencies of the symbolic order. Žižek refers to Marx's famous pronouncement about how the objective conditions of reality give the human consciousness its ultimate shape. What Žižek infers from Marx's hypothesis is that the defects and inconsistencies of the objective reality are in reciprocity with the subjective consciousness. The inconsistencies we identify in the objective reality, that is, our objective diagnosis "is itself 'subjective', it is a scheme of subjective reactions to a deadlock we confront in our practice and, in that sense, is symptomatic of this unresolved deadlock itself" (3). Žižek, then, proceeds to argue that the question whether ideology distorts the objective reality or not is irrelevant. What ideological construction ultimately reveals is that the subjective reactions to the problems of the objective reality are never disengaged from this reality's structural inconsistencies and defects. The reciprocity between the colonizers' subjective consciousness and the objective reality --the African landscape-- in "Heart of Darkness" suggests such a continuity of irresolution, which explains why Marlow's impressions of nature are never neutral, objective or indifferent. He treats the African nature in a manner that implies as if it has its own consciousness: "Nature herself tried to ward off intruders ... whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair" (42). His attribution of evil powers to the landscape suggests the symbolic construction of the colonizer's subjectivity marked with the same inconsistency that plagues the symbolic order. Benita Parry argues that Marlow constructs Africa as "a menacing metaphysical presence, a world without history or culture, a depraved Eden" (136). According to Edward Said, Africa appears as a "prehistoric earth... an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" in "Heart of Darkness" (63). Both Parry and Said's comments attest the traumatic presence of the landscape, which implies the fundamental inconsistency, the non-symbolizable kernel, that disrupts the symbolic order.

The behavior of the group Marlow travels with to the Central Station reflects the construction of the subject by a traumatized symbolic system. Crazed by fear and anxiety, the small band engages in such senseless acts that they are subjected to Marlow's derisive remarks. He ridicules them as "they empty every rifle they could lay hands on" at an old hippo that "had the bad habit of getting out on the bank and roaming at night over the station grounds" (56). During the long walk to the Central Station, Marlow inquires into the reasons why his companion, who often faints, is in Africa. The fellow's answer is "to make money of course" (48). To Marlow, who considers the pain he goes through, his answer does not make much sense. His companion's pathetic struggle with the heat evinces that he is totally unprepared for this venture. The fainting companion, who joins the bandwagon of greed for ivory, further signifies the inconsistencies of imperialism. He seems to embody its senseless and absurd aspects. The most blatant absurdity Marlow detects is the so-called greed for ivory. The fact that nobody does much about getting ivory makes Marlow think that the imperialist order is founded upon a scandalous pretense. It appears to Marlow that the colonial invasion of Africa --"the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration" (Conrad *The Last Essays* 17)-- pretends to be a high-handed operation in an absurd manner. Once in the Central Station, Marlow feels certain that greed for ivory is only feigned. The sight of machines and human beings decaying together in an atmosphere of maddening futility and abandonment in the first station is no less senseless and pathetic than the French warship. The look of the boiler "wallowing in the grass" and the railway truck "lying there on its back with its wheels in the air" convey futility and despair (43). The mysterious sound of blasting accompanies to the gloom of "decaying machinery" (43). The Europeans in the Central Station figure as a group of disoriented beings unnerved by the harsh conditions. Marlow himself is upset due to the torn bottom of the steamer, the only vehicle that will take him up the river. He perpetually rants about the manager who lacks "genius for organising, for initiative, or for order even" (49-50). Exposed to a continuous series of inconsistencies, idiocies, and senseless acts, Marlow starts to think that such "deplorable state" of things totally belies the drive for ivory (49). He notices how the inept management does things that are blatantly contrary to the imperialist goals. The foremost example is the steamer which cannot be fixed due to the lack of rivets. In the Central Station, even the simplest obstacle becomes an unassailable problem: "To get on with the work – to stop the hole. Rivets I wanted. There were cases of them down at the coast acases – piled up – burst... there wasn't one rivet to be found where it was wanted" (56). The brick-maker, who hangs around the station without any bricks, further increases the sense of absurdity and futility. Marlow presents him as the apogee of futility and pretense: "there wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year – waiting. It seems he could not make bricks without something, I don't know what – straw maybe" (52). Similarly incomprehensible to Marlow is the surprising panache of the chief accountant who presents an odd sight against the background of utter neglect and confusion. Marlow ridicules his "high-starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie and varnished boots" (45). The accountant apparently tries to give the impression that he is efficiently engaged in his colonial duties. Efficiency, nevertheless, is a far cry from what actually goes on. The so-called deviousness of the manager's assistant, who Marlow calls as "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" (46), is equally puzzling since his intrigues never pay off.

"Heart of Darkness" provides ample evidence about the fact that imperialism is fundamentally inconsistent and defective. One such evidence is ivory that appears as a mere buzzword and so does profit. The talk about ivory continues incessantly, yet Marlow hardly attests an instance of someone actually sets out to obtain it: "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life" (51). Marlow is struck by the odd fact that it is all pretense. The colonizers pretend that they desire ivory, yet they hardly ever make any effort to get it. Marlow notices that what they do is scheming for nothing: "There was an air of plotting about the Station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretense of the

whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work" (52). The futile pretense appears to be absurd and confusing to Marlow: "The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had... They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account, -but as to effectually lifting a finger- oh no" (52). Pointing to the ideological overdetermination of "the subjective conditions" (31) in "Heart of Darkness," Stephen Ross argues that overlapping of the Empire and subjectivity in Conrad suggests a broader system of symbolization, which he describes as "the proto-Imperial modernity" (33). According to Ross, what determines the colonial reality is the money-driven ideology of "capitalist rationalization," which is "characterized by monopolistic trading concerns driven by the profit motive" (33). The conundrum "Heart of Darkness" ultimately poses, however, is how come such a rationally planned, profit-driven system produces such amount of futility, absurdity, and wastefulness. Marlow's question, "what it all meant" (50), sums up imperialism as an inconsistent, futile, and senseless system.

The major irony "Heart of Darkness" presents is that despite its inconsistencies imperialism is frantically defended for representing the truth. A case in point is Kurtz's young Russian devotee. The youth's fanatical belief in Kurtz shows how imperialism produces its subjects, that is, provides them with an identity and allows them to express their subjectivity. The fact that imperialism speaks through the young Russian can be seen in his enthusiastic description of Kurtz, who, he claims, "has enlarged [his] mind" (82). Although Marlow is astonished at the youth's fanaticism of Kurtz, he does not express his disapproval. Instead, he considers the possibility of an existential drive behind such fanaticism and in a strange and absurd way, points to the need "to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with maximum privation" (82). Marlow's efforts for providing an existential rationale for the youth's blatant senselessness suggests that the colonizer suffers from the same inconsistencies that plague the symbolic system. The futility of providing some justification for the imperial conquest also reveals that Marlow only pretends to be skeptical about imperialism. "Heart of Darkness" presents him as a cynic who acknowledges its evils, yet still continues to support it. Slavoj Žižek points out that the modern cynical mindset provides ample evidence about the symbolic construction of the subject and refers to Peter Sloterdijk's notion of "*enlightened false consciousness*" (5) in his discussion of the connection between cynicism and ideological construction. According to Sloterdijk, Žižek argues, the cynical subjectivity represents "modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has both labored successfully and in vain" (5). Although the cynical subject is aware of the falseness of the bourgeois values, he/she is indifferent to this fact: "Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered" (5). This suggests the ideological overdetermination--construction--of the subject, who is ready to approve of depravity and corruption in any form. Marlow shows his cynical face as he tries to camouflage the young Russian's fanatical defense of what Kurtz represents: "If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth" (82). Marlow knows very well that the young Russian's role model is Kurtz, the colonizer *par excellence*, yet he still insists on portraying the Russian youth as a naïve and idealistic adventurer. That is to say, Marlow is indifferent to the fact that, for the Russian, Africa represents a desire for carving out a career of looting. The most subversive point "Heart of Darkness" makes about imperialism and its subjects is about such cynicism. Not only does the cynical subject overlook moral depravity but he also acts as if depravity represents the moral truth. Slavoj Žižek argues that the cynical reason dictates a justification of moral degeneracy as moral decency: "This cynicism is not a direct position of immorality, it is more like morality itself put in the service of immorality" (*The Sublime* 30). He raises the same point with slight modifications in his late work, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2012), about the ideological roots of the confusion of what is morally right and what is wrong and claims that we are faced with ideological dilution rather than distortion. He draws his examples from the corporate media which, he contends, equally dilutes and adulterates the social and political movements with a liberating potential and the ones with the potential for posing a radical threat to the world democracy. With such indiscriminatory sweep, he maintains, the corporate media lumps everything into a single whole. The resulting inconsistencies and chaos, according to Žižek, can hardly be explained by the goals of objectivity and neutrality. He regards such confusion of right and wrong as the fundamental paradox in the heart of global capitalism (1).

Conrad deals with the same paradox in the heart of imperialism--the late stage of capitalism, as Lenin states--by representing Marlow's moral dilemma. It is astonishing that despite his knowledge of his moral depravity, deviation, his crimes, Marlow comes up with a quick pretext for Kurtz and furthermore, regards his final cries as signs of remorse and calls it 'moral victory': "Better his cry - much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last" (99). Supporting the idea that Kurtz is full of remorse, he declares his loyalty to Kurtz. Ralph Maud objects to the line of criticism that describes "Heart of Darkness" as a story of remorse, arguing that such commentary does not make sense: "A man goes into the center of Africa and does extraordinarily horrible things, and then in a final moment admits they are horrible. That is no story of consequence... This cannot be Conrad's intention" (209). A number of critics, however, regard Marlow's acquittal of Kurtz as a naïve impulse, as romantic idealism, and as a recognition of the tragic human fallacy. Taking Maud's objection into account, one can argue that Marlow's deliverance of Kurtz is a cynical inversion of the moral truth. Marlow's inconsistency recalls Max Horkheimer's criticism of the modern individual's general attitude, which he names as "well-informed cynicism" (77). In a similar manner to Sloterdijk, Horkheimer has criticized the inversion of values under the capitalist ideology and argued that it shows the modern subject's desensitization to hypocrisy and decadence of modern civilization. Horkheimer has contended that the modern individuals "are never rationally reconciled to civilization. Instead they bow to it, secretly accepting the identity of reason and domination, of civilization and the ideal, however much they may shrug their shoulders" (77). "Heart of Darkness" shows that the modern civilization is based on imperialist domination. Although Marlow seems to disapprove of Kurtz's crimes committed in the name of 'bringing civilization to the uncivilized parts of the world', he hardly shows any signs of disapproving imperialism. His paradox is the paradox of the symbolic system that determines his subjectivity. That is to say, Marlow's cynicism can only be explained through the ideological overdetermination of the modern subject.

"Heart of Darkness" is a work that achieves unprecedented depths in terms of penetrating the imperialist ideology. In his shocking report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, Kurtz openly calls for genocide: "Exterminate all the brutes" (78). Conrad implies that it is such monstrosity that is completely overlooked in the name of imperialism. A conspicuous

evidence of cheering Kurtz for being a monster can be found in Marlow's description of the brick maker in the Central Station who calls Kurtz as "an emissary of pity and science and progress, and devil knows what else" (59). In an effort to expose the colonial hypocrisy, Marlow relates his exact statement: "We want,' he began to declaim suddenly, 'for the guidance of the cause intrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose'" (59). The brickmaker apparently sees himself as part of 'a higher mission' entrusted to him by the civilized world. Kurtz's call for genocide and the brickmaker's talk of singleness of purpose sum up the reality of imperialism exposed to the full in "Heart of Darkness." Recent criticism that has diagnosed Kurtz's exorbitance as a general sense of disappointment with the social and moral norms of the civilized world nevertheless overlooks Conrad's work's excellent exposition of such inconsistency. In *Conrad and Impressionism*, John G. Peters reads the postscript as Kurtz's "disillusioned response" to the arbitrary values of civilization (140). Peters argues that it is a desperate cry delivered by the frustrated European who realizes the shadowy substance of the ideals he adhered. Similarly, Peter Firchow points to Kurtz's indifference to the social norms and conventions and argues that, away from the society, he is overcome by the illusion that he is above common morality:

Kurtz's situation is archetypal in Conrad's fiction... the typical protagonist, often an exile, finds himself far from home and his own kind; he is then tempted by excessive pride and by actual or imagined superior ability into believing that he is morally above the conventions of his own society and therefore justified in doing just about anything he pleases including the exploitation of the supposed inferiors. (74)

The idea that all alone in the wilderness in a state of total detachment from the social and moral norms, Kurtz is driven more and more into himself, believing his own moral superiority assumes a universal corruptible human essence and therefore, releases the individual from moral responsibility. The critics agree that Joseph Conrad typically constructs the solitary subject as being overcome either by a sense of frustration or by an illusion of moral superiority, the result of which is depravity. The conservative construction of an unreliable human 'essence' that is prone to aberrance in the absence of laws is centered by such criticism. Yet, positing a morally weak human essence does not explain the reproduction of the imperialist system. What is necessary here is to examine the ways in which the subject is produced by the system which is itself inconsistent and defective. Marlow's following remarks about Kurtz represent the imperialist construction of the subject: "The wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion...The wilderness ... echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core" (86). The suggestion of the innate weakness and unreliability of human nature is used to normalize the aberrant behavior. The subject as a weak and corruptible human being is exempt from guilt.

Few critics have considered Kurtz as the symbolically overdetermined subject of imperialism and one of them is Ralph Maud. According to Maud, Kurtz's call for genocide actually reflects the ultimate goal of the top institutions of the civilized world; therefore, he argues that the infamous postscript is "a succinct rephrasing of what the International Society, if it were not blinded by hypocrisy, would see it is already proposing" (208). Maud states that "in intense mockery, Kurtz is giving the benevolent Society its true slogan" (208). Kurtz and the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs represent cynicism in its purest form. Cynical attitude, as Žižek points, does not give clear signals of an obvious moral depravity. It rather uses virtue and goodness for depraved ends. Kurtz's report promoted by the International Society clearly puts forward that genocide is a solution for 'the suppression of savagery.' In the face of such truth, Marlow's puzzling regard of Kurtz can only be justified through a morally indifferent cynicism. Jerome Thale argues that "Marlow finds it hard to explain Kurtz and justify his own stand" (179). Indeed, as he tries to clarify his position with regard to Kurtz, Marlow falters: "Mind, I am not trying to excuse or even explain – I am trying to account to myself for – for – Mr Kurtz – for the shade of Mr Kurtz" (77). His faltering suggests that he experiences a perturbing confusion. It is, however, hard to understand why Marlow is confused about a moral situation which is quite clear as not to raise any doubts neither cause any ambiguity. The common reaction to Kurtz's crimes would be an open disapproval. Instead of condemning his blatant lawlessness supported by the imperialist ideology, Marlow withdraws from extending a judgment and digresses from the subject. As a result, we see him promoting a nihilist view of life towards the end of his narrative: "Destiny. My destiny! Droll thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" (98). His final embrace of nihilism suggests a desire to escape from moral responsibility to a more disinterested ground provided by the general narrative of the absurdity and meaninglessness of the human condition. Marlow's nihilism stands in the culminating point of Conrad's critique of the imperialist ideology. His nihilist viewpoint is the supreme evidence of the way in which imperialism assumes a non-ideological form. While normalizing Kurtz and his degraded conduct as the universally corruptible essence of all human beings, he makes the colonial exploitation and brutality look like temporary and pardonable, which is suggested in the manner he juxtaposes the ideas of 'dealing with the nightmare' and 'loyalty to Kurtz' in the same statement: "I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end, and to show my loyalty to Kurtz once more" (98). His statement proves that the cynical subject knows that all crimes and brutalities are out in the open, yet he proceeds to forgive them. The idea Conrad conveys is that instead of denouncing imperialism, which Conrad defines as "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of rapacious and pitiless folly" (*Last Essays* 44), Marlow tries to figure out ways to pardon it. His efforts of normalizing Kurtz's deplorable crimes suggest the cynical subject as the main prop of the imperial order.

Conrad portrays imperialism as an inconsistent, defective system in "Heart of Darkness." What makes his representation of imperialism profoundly unique, however, is the way his work implies that imperialism produces subjectivities that are also defective. Marlow's seeing through the ideological deception is a proof of such constructive defect: he pretends that there is no deception. His final lie to Kurtz's Intended underlies his pretense. He deplores Kurtz's monstrosities, yet he presents him as an idealist. Similarly, he deplores the colonial brutalities, yet he promotes 'an unselfish belief in the idea.' It seems that the only plausible reason that can provide a clue to Marlow's puzzling inconsistency is the symbolic overdetermination of the colonizer. Marlow's inconsistency undeniably corresponds to the inconsistency in the heart of the symbolic order, which ultimately proves that the subject is produced by the symbolic order.

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