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HEART OF DARKNESS AND THE BEACH OF FALESÁ: PROMOTING OR SUBVERTING IMPERIALISM AND SOCIAL DARWINISM

**Heart of Darkness and the Beach of Falesá: Sosyal Darwinizm ve
Emperyalizmin Devamı ya da Sonu**

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse social Darwinism and imperialism that accelerated colonialism with racist discourses in 19th century by taking two literary works Heart of Darkness (1899) and The Beach of Falesá (1892) into the centre of the discussion. Although written in different settings by authors from different backgrounds, successively in Congo by Joseph Conrad and in Samoa by Robert Louis Stevenson, two novels shed light on the 19th century imperial and colonial discourses. The first part of the article will focus on the relation between imperialism, social Darwinism, racism and their reflections on the works. Later on, these works and their authors will critically be compared through a thematic approach to evaluate their critical stance for imperialism and social Darwinism. The article concludes that the central protagonists, white men Wiltshire in The Beach of Falesá and Marlow in Heart of Darkness set out their journey with imperial pursuits such as exploitation and superiority, but they both go through a sense of illumination and catharsis as they reach at the heart of imperialism where they encounter the politics of what is savage and civilised.

Keywords: Social Darwinism, Imperialism, Form, Content and Racism.

Öz

Bu çalışma, 19. yüzyılda ırkçı söylemlerle sömürgeciliği hızlandıran sosyal Darwinizm ve emperyalizmi Heart of Darkness (1899) ve The Falesá Beach (1892) romanlarını tartışmanın merkezine alarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Her iki eser sırasıyla Kongo ve Somoa olmak üzere farklı yerleşim yerlerini ele alan, Joseph Conrad ve Robert Louis Stevenson gibi farklı yazın kültürüne sahip yazarlar tarafından kaleme alınsa da 19. yüzyıl imparatorluk ve sömürgecilik söylemlerine benzer yönlerden ışık tutmaktadır. Makalenin ilk bölümü emperyalizm, sosyal Darwinizm, ırkçılık ve bunların ilgili eserlerde yansımaları ve birbirleri ile olan ilişkisine odaklanacaktır. Daha sonra, eserler ve yazarların emperyalizm ve sosyal Darwinizme olan mesafeleri ya da eleştirel duruşları karşılaştırmalı olarak tematik yöntem ile değerlendirilecektir. Makale, The Beach of Falesá'daki beyaz adam Wiltshire ve Heart of Darkness'daki Marlow'un sırasıyla Kongo ve Somoa'ya olan yolculuklarını sömürü ve üstünlük gibi emperyal arayışlarla başlattığını ancak her ikisinin de yolculukları boyunca bir aydınlatma ve katarsis hissi yaşadıklarını ve aslında gerçek vahşi ve uygar olanın siyasetiyle tam olarak emperyalizmin kalbinde karşılaştıkları sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Darwinizm, Emperyalizm, Form, İçerik ve Irkçılık.

1. INTRODUCTION

In literary analyses, literary works are supposed to have strong links with social, economic, historical, political and cultural events of the period in which they are produced. Similarly, their connection to life and worldview of the authors is a matter of fact, which literary critics agree on. However, while analysing a literary work, the tendency to take representations as reflecting an author's stance on a particular subject could be misleading. This might further result in categorising if not labelling an author, and hence in limiting potential a literary work can offer for its readership. This misassumption can be avoided if the link between form and content or the ways in which they contradict can be probed properly. If both of them point to the same or similar notions in a work, then it would be easier to comment on the stance of an author for a particular subject. However, there are the times when the content and form in a literary work might require further attention from critics and readers for meaningful inferences.

A literary work offers representations that could be interpreted in several ways depending on the readership it addresses, and the socio-historical background it rests on. The cases of Joseph Conrad and Robert Louis Stevenson exemplify how the content of their works can create diverse if not contradicting interpretations among their readership. Here the question of to what extent or how successful a work produced by a western author can truly represent or reflect the concerns and interests of subaltern communities. Or would it be always considered a way for them to be labelled as "imperialist", "racist", "colonist" or "Darwinist" as suggested by some critics or readers. Bearing this in mind, this study aims to analyse social Darwinism and imperialism that accelerated colonialism together with racist discourses in 19th century by focusing on two works *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *The Beach of Falesá* (1892). Written in different settings by authors from different backgrounds, successively in Congo by Joseph Conrad and in Samoa by Robert Louis Stevenson, two works shed light on the 19th century imperial and colonial discussions. In the first part of the study, I will try to explain the relation between imperialism, social Darwinism, racism and their reflections in the selected works.

Later on, the novels and their authors will carefully be compared in terms of their critical stance on imperialism and social Darwinism to evaluate accusations levelled against them by critics like Nigerian novelist. Chinua Achebe (1977) claims Conrad to be "a bloody racist" (p. 788), and Darren Jackson (2000) similarly blames Stevenson for being racist for contributing to the colonial enterprise in Samoa by depicting natives as

objects rather than agents on their own terms. In a more sophisticated view, Edward Said would argue that “Conrad was both anti-imperialist and imperialist”, acknowledging both limitations in his vision as well as anticipation of imperialism as a corrupted system (p. xviii). I would argue that white men Wiltshire in *The Beach of Falesá* and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* as the heroes of the novels set out their journey with imperial system pursuits such exploitation, but they both undergo a sense of illumination and catharsis during their journeys into the heart of imperialism where they discover the politics of so-called civilisation. Similarly, white villains, Case in *The Beach of Falesá* and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, contrary to Darwin’s (1859) book *Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* cannot survive at the end as the fittest, but rather end their journeys as the weakest, representing the destructive effects of imperialism on both white men and natives. The endings of the works hint the ways in which readers can reconsider representations as to whether promoting or avoiding imperialism and social Darwinism. For instance, the last words of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, “the horror! the horror!” just before he dies can be considered as the horror of imperialism and social Darwinism (Conrad, 1899, p. 145).

As for some critics to follow in the later parts of the article, “the horror!” hints at misrepresentations of the aborigines as brutal and barbaric for they killed Kurtz at the end. However, Marlow, the central protagonist highlights the share the western world has in creating the image of Kurtz: “all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (Conrad, 1899, p. 63). Considering the publication date of the novel, 1899 a time when imperialism reached its peak in the nineteenth century Europe, Marlow’s statement indeed counters accusations against Conrad. Moreover, Conrad (1927, as cited in Firchow, 2000) in his correspondence admits that “[b]efore the Congo I was a mere animal”, implying his psychological breakdown as well as reconciliation with the self. The two works implicitly convey the idea that what is the dark is indeed the darkness of imperialism and colonialism. Conrad and Stevenson bring their readers to the heart of imperialism where white men corrupt and eventually get corrupted. In this sense, this study makes a journey between these two texts as a way to explore representations of what might be misinterpreted by critics.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The nineteenth century was an era in which European countries competed with each other to establish overseas colonies for new resources and human labour (Seeley, 1883). The enlightenment period of the

eighteenth century was built upon the idea of dualism, promoting and justifying binary oppositions as the natural processes of human life. In this philosophy, those who did not belong to where the idea of enlightenment originated was considered to be the other and described as “cannibal”, “animal”, “primitive” and “prehistoric” living in “dark place” in need of being “tamed”. This was indeed a justification for Europeans to set out for the imperial pursuits. This justification was maintained on scientific grounds by studies and ideologies they promoted.

The studies of Charles Darwin fall into the this category with its ideology that has opened and contributed to legitimising racism and imperialism in the nineteenth century. In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin (1871) proposed that all human races represent different stages of evolution and some races are superior than others, while some are at the same level with apes. Darwin (1871) took his argument further, suggesting that “the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races” in a near future and control their places (p. 201). Darwin validated his theory in a journey to Tierra del Fuego in 1871, describing local Fuegians community as savage and uncivilised compared to civilised white men. However, W. Parker Snow’s (1861) journey to the same region proved the otherwise, recounting aborigines as nice, strong, talented community, caring their children and accepting older women’s authority (p. 264). Nineteenth century scientists such as Herbert Spencer, Thomas Malthus and Francis Galton did experiments in regards to Darwin’s idea of hierarchal relations between inferior and superior races. The validation of this theory would mean authority of some races over others that would in return unquestionably open the way of exploitation or extermination of “inferior races”.

Darwin’s theories also received criticism from scientists in diverse disciplines. Upon reading *Origin of Species* (1859), Adam Sedgwick (1859) responded Darwin’s theory of natural selection negatively for being too subjective with facts based on assumptions. In his *What Darwin Really Said* Irish scholar, Benjamin Farrington (1996) states that Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* proposed ideas that all together signified the inequality of human races. In a similar vein, Indian anthropologist Lalita Vidyarthi (1983) finds Darwin’s evolution theory responsible for promoting racism in social sciences, promoting white men at the highest rank in “the survival of fittest” (p. 54).

Darwin’s theories advanced in line with the expansion of England, having colonies that range from India to Latin America (Seeley, 1883). On

its way to imperialism, a scientific theory like Darwin's would enable England to control and govern territories, claiming that the inhabitants are primitive and animalistic in need of help. Such a scientific theory would also counter accusations against England such as imperialist or expansionist. In explaining the relation between social Darwinism, imperialism and racism, James Joll (1980) states that social Darwinism is one of the most key ideas that inspired imperialism (p. 102). The idea promoted nations in a constant struggle with each other. Within this struggle some races are considered to be stronger than others with attempts to validate the fact through encounters between the coloniser and the colonised. Some social Darwinist scholars went further, arguing that racial extermination, even if by bloody means, would result in moral progress for humanity (Weikart, 2003). The idea of extermination also echoes in *Heart of Darkness*: "Exterminate all the brutes!" that reflects the dominant social Darwinist theory of the period.¹

The colonial and imperial activities during the nineteenth century divided the world into two poles: those who made their way to the exploration and eventually exploitation of new territories, and those who were unaware of colonial activities till new settlers arrive in their land. The encounter between 'civilized men' and 'uncivilized one' and its distorting effects on both sides are the recurring themes in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Beach of Falesá*. In International African Association (IAA) conference, King Leopold II of Belgium starts his words, claiming that "[t]o open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress" (Watt, 1981, p. 139). His words echo if not represent the events that take place in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad hints at the brutality of European imperialism in general and Leopold's massacre of at least ten million people in Congo for the sake of a nation's prosperity. This potentially evokes the idea that Conrad establishes links between his *Heart of Darkness* and the darkness of heart that specifically belongs to King Leopold II. With his example of Samoa in *The Beach of Falesá*, Robert Louis Stevenson writes on white man's contamination of native culture as a result of imperialism, and in this sense, it corresponds to Conrad's depiction of imperial brutality. He mentions in one of his letters to his cousin Alan Mobray Stevenson: "It is impossible to live here and not feel very solely the consequences of horrid white management" (Hillier, 1989, p. 26). The

¹ This assertion is evident in the writings of Alfred Kirchhoff, in Friedrich Anton Heller von Hellwald's work *History of Culture* (1875) and Friedrich Ratzel's work *Being and Becoming* (1869).

personal and first-hand experiences of both author in the local culture hints the ways in which they handle the white settlement in their fiction.

3. HEART OF DARKNESS AND THE BEACH OF FALESÁ: PERILS OF OR TO IMPERIALISM?

Joseph Conrad's criticism of imperialism rests on his time during the 1890 while working in a Belgian trading company. His long disputed novel *Heart of Darkness* focuses on imperialism from an analytical and ethical point of view. His protagonist Kurtz represents imperial but also the 'intellectual' western community. He is made to believe into the clichés of imperialism like bringing civilisation to the dark places or dark souls. However, the end of the novel details how he is ruined at the heart of imperialism in Congo as a result of following the imperial purists that indeed shed light on the darkest part of human mentality.

As Conrad questions both the meaning of life and the western values and principles, the novel is not only a journey to the unknown depths of Africa but also a journey to the human heart, which potentially might be darker than Africa's presumed darkness. At the very beginning of the novel Conrad by using a technique, which confronts readers with the narrator starts the dialogue between reader and author. Therefore, seafarer is both a listener and reader. Conrad's deployment of Marlow as a narrator can be a signifier of a new developing technique to distance himself as the author to be able to disclose imperialism implicitly at a time when imperialism and its scientific verification, social Darwinism are at their peak.

Conrad's narrator does not make very explicit comments during the whole story. While narrating, Marlow most of the time unconsciously deviates from the course of events, addresses to readers, becomes suddenly tongue – tied, and he explains events without making any connections. This narration in bits and with repetitions enables both Marlow and readers to figure out and analyse how western civilisation and imperialism work in Congo. In other words, Marlow pretends as if speaking but actually remaining silent. This could be called, with what I coin a 'Conrardian' trick to reinforce the validity of what he witnessed personally during his seven-month-stay in Congo. In other words, Marlow, rather than the author can only narrate effects of incidents on himself. This is because he finds himself in a chaotic atmosphere, which he cannot understand and resist easily. Although this may seem to have silenced the narrator, it actually gives him a convincing narration if not an authority in that he is restricted and dramatized before the readers.

As a western explorer Marlow can be contextually considered representing imperialism, but as an observer he reflects Conrad's own experiences in Congo, and his changing views on European imperialism. This is quite evident on Conrad's striking words that imply an inner transformation he went through and later represented it through Marlow in his novel: "Before Congo I was just a mere animal" (1927, as cited in Firchow, 2000). Here the past tense signifies the end of an action or an idea, awakening from the illusion of imperialism. Similarly, Marlow successively travelling to outer, central and finally inner stations develops sympathy for aborigines, observing their behaviours within the range of 'normality', which he once was told to be brutal:

Yes; I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze (Conrad, 1899, p. 42).

This is the moment when Marlow starts questioning his value judgments for the western civilisation, especially that the western man represents the ideal man. From this point, he witnesses abusive power of civilisation to its own benefits. The closer Marlow becomes to the locals, the better he begins to anticipate how they are mis-portrayed from a western stand. For instance, he is surprised to witness that though aborigines in the crew are quite hungry and stronger than the white men in quantity, they do not attack to eat any of them. Cannibal crew, who is thirty, could eat five men easily but what does prevent them, asks Marlow both to himself and to the reader that how they control themselves while being so hungry? Then, Marlow speaks to his reader: "You can't understand. How could you? - with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbors ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums" (Conrad, 1899, p. 49). Here Conrad highlights a gradual awaking of his protagonist in sympathy with what is predefined as 'the other.'

Another scene where readers can witness Marlow's changing attitudes towards aborigines is when he questions the attitude of white man towards them: "They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing

but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom” (Conrad, 1899, p. 18). In another scene, Marlow’s sympathy becomes pronounced physically when he “offer[s] one of [his] good Swede’s ship’s biscuits” to starving local man (Conrad, 1899, p. 19). Therefore, Conrad makes his protagonist question the brutality of imperialism repeatedly: “He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck – Why?” (Conrad, 1899, p. 19). Although ‘white worsted round native’s neck’ is quite racist, it actually becomes quite ironic when Marlow is confused with it. In this sense, the tension between form and content is frequently represented by Marlow’s inner tensions. The content of the novel conveys predefined western images of Africans as inhuman and savage. However, it also maintains their native habits and traditions. The form mostly operates through Marlow both as the narrator and observer, and it highlights his changing attitudes towards Africans. Here Conrad deconstructs western myths on aborigines, and leaves incidents to the common sense of his readership. In other words, content of the novel, which might presumably be occupied with images that are in line with imperial and racist discourses, is indeed in a tension with its form, the way the content is conveyed through.

Stevenson’s *The Beach of Falesá* follows a similar pattern with *The Heart of Darkness*. Wiltshire, the European trader admires Case whom he regards as a talented and civilized white man. Like Kurtz, Case controls aborigines, claiming that he has divine and supernatural powers. In line with the imperial purists, he exploits locals to his own benefits. However, Wiltshire, Marlow like character of Stevenson is tricked by Case as he is considered an opponent on his way. Wiltshire has a love affair with a native girl, called Uma. Case prepares a fake marriage ceremony for them. Upon this Uma is given a marriage certificate in which it is written that “[t]his is to certify that *Uma* daughter of *Faavao* of *Falesá*, island of __, is illegally married to *Mr John Wiltshire* for one night, and *Mr John Wiltshire* is at liberty to send her to hell next morning” (Stevenson, 1892, p. 11). However, Uma is a woman cursed and tabooed by her society. This would in return prevents Wiltshire from trading with locals. Unaware of the trick, Wiltshire gets help from Case, as he can speak the native language. He wants to learn the reason of his being tabooed:

You tell them who I am. I’m a white man, and a British Subject, and no end of a big chief at home; and I’ve come here to do them good and bring them civilization; and no sooner have I got my trade sorted out, than they go and taboo me and no one dare come near my place! Tell them I don’t mean to fly in the face of anything legal; and if what they want present, I’ll do

what's fair. And tell them plain, that I demand the reason of this treatment as a White Man and a British subject (Stevenson, 1892, p. 13).

Wiltshire's speech carries racist and imperial discourses, and echoes the words that were once uttered by one of the leading Social Darwinists, Benjamin Kidd (1898): "If he has right there at all, he is there in the name of civilization; if our civilization has any right there at all, it is because it represents higher ideals of humanity, a higher type of social order" (p. 54). The way Wiltshire behaves exemplifies the implications of social Darwinism in which it is believed that certain races have rights over others as they represent the ideals of civilisation. Wiltshire's love affair with a native woman, and also his competition with Case, another white man can be found in Godeffroys of German's policies for European traders, one of the largest trading firms in Samoa at that time:

Learn the native language. Don't get into quarrels with locals whites. Have no truck with missionaries, except, as humanity requires... Get a native woman of your own, but no nonsense about marrying her... Get in that copra... Keep your mouth shut (Hillier, 1989, p. 165).

Policies of the firm serves to interests of imperial enterprise, and hence encourages its members to gain 'profit' as much as possible. The idea of gaining more profit at any cost opens the way of exploitation of not only native resources, but also its culture. However, as the story unfolds, Stevenson's ideas on imperialism become clearer. In other words, Wiltshire's pre-racist discourses and behaviours regress, and indeed he starts doing the exact opposite of what German firm advised above for European traders to follow in Samoa. This is quite evident firstly, when he gets into quarrel with the other European trader, Case and eliminates him both for the sake of natives and his trade, secondly when he prepares a real marriage ceremony with Uma according to both Christianity and native traditions. He finally abandons his initial purpose of visiting the island and chooses a life with Uma: "I would rather have you [Uma] than all the copra in the South Seas" (Stevenson, 1892, p. 17). These are the moments when Wiltshire revolts against directly codes of imperialism and social Darwinism. This is because a marriage between a white man and a local woman would relatively mean accepting Uma as his equal in her own terms. This in return would subvert the hierarchal relations and boundaries that social Darwinism promoted.

Heart of Darkness and *The Beach of Falesá* also detail the distorting effects of imperialism on white men. This suggests that imperialism is a

phenomenon that degenerates westerners as much as it exploits locals. In *The Beach* the figure of Captain Randhall represents European degeneration, spending his entire energy and time on drinking alcohol, and falling in a condition worse than that of the worst natives. In *Heart* Marlow meets brick maker who actually does not make any but only messes around. These are clear examples how imperialism can distort human potential and mind with examples from both sides. In this sense, the physical journeys that initially start with imperial pursuits in both fictions can be read as journeys into humans' inner self. Marlow sailed, visited different parts of the world, and gained new knowledge with fresh experiences. Similarly, Kurtz went through a process of re-barbarization or reverse evolution. By leaving all moral stages of humanity, he descends to the barbarism of primitive societies. Just before Kurtz dies, he is horrified for being in dilemma between his western values and his first-hand experiences in Africa. In their works, Conrad and Stevenson represent how unending and uncontrollable demands of humans indeed enslave them as in the example of respective protagonists, Kurtz and Case. Then here the question is once again pronounced: What is horror?

4. CONCLUSION

The credibility if not the ability to represent the concerns and interests of aborigines during the time of imperialism in literary works has been questioned when it comes to authors from western background like Stevenson and Conrad. Therefore, it is not surprising that they were blamed for the lack or misrepresentation of aborigine culture and its concerns. However, their descriptions highlight the predefined assumptions of Europeans visiting Africa and South Pacific at that time. In other words, they do not maintain the way aborigines are initially depicted, but rather they create the ways in which readers can create their own perceptions on the local culture regardless of white men's observations. In both fictions, we are invited to reconsider the crucial question: where does 'dark heart' beat faster: overseas or in Europe itself? At the end of both works, imperialism is shown not only to harm what all that belongs to 'the others', but also to sacrifice his own subjects such as, Kurtz and Case though being the fittest to survive. Conrad's (1899) statement that "You can't judge Mr Kurtz as you would an ordinary man" is a reminder for readers and critics (p. 56). In a similar way, it would not be wise to judge *Heart of Darkness* and *The Beach of Falesá* over the course of events and depictions without acknowledging their authors' personal experiences and their protagonists' voyages into depths of human mentality.

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