Dialogism in Heart of Darkness:
The Voices Within

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الحوارية ورواية قلب الظلام : الأصوات الداخلية

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Abstract:

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is known for its narrative complexity; it is intentionally written to be confusing by the adoption of the non-linear narrative style, unfolding in a series of unrelated events. It achieves multiplicity of meaning by virtue of this complexity resulting from the seemingly single-voiced narrative. This reading strategy allows the reader to view the novel in a more comprehensive way, taking into consideration relationships that connect the speaker with the author, auditor, and reader. These agents interact in the narrative to create Bakhtinian dialogism, where meaning emerges from polyphony, the interplay of all vocal or non-vocal voices in the novel..

ملخص البحث:

تتوصل رواية قلب الظلام لجوزيف كونراد للمعنى عن طريق التعقيد الروائي المعتمد على أسـلوب سـردي مركب، وزمن لاخطي، وأحداث غير مترابطة، ينقلها راو للسرد. بيد هذا الراوي المفرد يعكس بالرغم مـن فرديتـه أصواتاً أخرى، متيحاً للقـارئ رؤية العمل على نحـو أكثر شـمولاً، من خـلال ربـط القـارئ بـالمؤلف، والراوي، والـسامع الـصامت داخـل الرواية. وتتفاعـل هـذه العوامـل الـسردية لتخـلق تناغمـاً فـي الـشكل والمعنى ينبع من التعددية الصوتية المعتمدة على تداخل الأصوات في الرواية، مايسمع منها ومالا يسمع.

Like the frame narrator in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the reader struggles with the "faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips" which Marlow presents in his story (30). The narrative of *Heart of Darkness* almost becomes the story's focal point and protagonist. It conveys multiple interpretations and meanings through its seemingly single-voiced approach. In his influential book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes the single-voiced narration as "one of the most fundamental characteristic features of prose" because of its "possibility of employing on the plane of a single work discourse of various types" (200). By utilizing the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, the reader can perceive how it plays an important role in *Heart of Darkness* and how the novel is ultimately read and understood, allowing him or her to view the dialogic nature of prose narrative, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the work and how its various narrative elements (author, reader, and auditor) interact with the speaker to produce a meaning-generating mechanism beyond the usual narrative monopoly held by the author or the speaker.

The relationships among the speaker, author, auditor, and reader converge in a triangle that connects these four agents of the narrative. This triangle can be illustrated by imagining the speaker who maintains and disseminates the narrative in the middle of the triangle and each of the other three agents at the angles, interacting directly with the speaker and with each other. As each of these agents has an effect over the other, they all produce a dialogic piece of language whose polyphonic features generate an interactive narrative that relies on these relationships to deliver a full meaning. It is through the speaker that the other three agents (author, auditor, and reader) meet, but their influence on each other and on the author is distinct. The auditor can, for instance, have an indirect relationship with the reader without the speaker's conscious approval and so can the reader, especially in cases of irony where the speaker is unaware of the full implications of his utterances.

By observing and acknowledging the dialogic aspect of the narrative, the reader gains the skill to adapt to the different levels of dialogue in it, permitting him or her to be involved more fully in

and with the narrative. Bakhtin writes that "language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it. Dialogic interaction is indeed the authentic sphere where language *lives*" (183, emphasis is Bakhtin's). Once the author establishes this polyphonic feature of his or her narrative, which results in creating a dialogic discourse by means of breaking the unity between the voice and its source and allowing other voices to emerge from his or her single-voiced narration, the author, then, gives the reader the opportunity to see the narrative dialogue in a wider scope by dissolving the barriers between the author, the speaker, the auditor, and himself or herself. In *Heart of Darkness* this objective is only achieved once the reader begins to discern the voices behind Marlow's "seemingly" single-voiced narrative.

Dialogism is the term Bakhtin gives to the interactive feature in prose in general, and in the novel in particular, among the different voices in the narrative. No single voice is permitted to dominate in dialogism. The very nature of dialogism entails the "presence of two distinct voices in one utterance" (Vice 45). Meaning emerges from polyphony, the interplay of all the voices in the novel whether or not they actually speak. Through the "vocal" voice of the speaker, the other "non-vocal" voices manifest themselves.

This polyphonic nature of the novel undermines the relationships among characters and/or the author, all of which is created and maintained by Marlow's narrative. Although we hear only Marlow's voice, we can discern from it other voices that create intrinsic relationships which include the author/speaker, speaker/auditor, speaker/reader, author/auditor, author/reader, and even auditor/reader relationship. Not only are we able to listen to the other characters through the first-person narrative, but we, through Marlow's seemingly monologic words, are able to recognize the author's voice via his speaker's in what may be called the author's betrayal of the speaker.[1] Although we hear the

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(1) Critics have grown rather familiar with the separation between the author and the speaker. in 1961 the critic Wayne C. Booth, in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, coined the term "unreliable narrator" to account for narratives where the opinions of the author and the speaker diverge. Unreliable narrators divulge information that prove while events unfold that they are incorrect. But when the author permits his or her speaker to utter something that not only

distinctive voice of the speaker, Marlow, we still hear the "unspoken" voice of the author and feel his presence in the story. One of the functions of acknowledging the author's voice in the novel in general, and in *Heart of Darkness* in specific, is to uncover the multiple meanings that originate from the reading of the narrative in the form of irony, which transforms the narrative dialogically, creating two layers of meaning: ironic and literal. The various voices discerned in irony create a narrative environment that shapes the ultimate meaning of the novel. Bakhtin maintains that

> the dialogic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, its dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance. (*Dialogic* 272)

Furthermore, Bakhtin emphasizes the narrative functionality of irony, or instances where the language is used in two (or more) different spheres in order to convey multiple indications. Bakhtin underscores this nature of dialogism when he states that:

> A comic playing with language, a story "not from the author" (but from a narrator, posited author or character), character speech, character zones and lastly various introductory or framing genres are the basic forms or incorporating and organizing heteroglossia in the novel. All these forms permit language to be used in ways that are indirect, conditional, distanced. (*Dialogic* 323)

Irony permits the various voices in the novel to surface, allowing, as far as dialogism is concerned, for the problematization of the reading of the novel by creating a multi-faceted, meaning-making technique that the novel is capable of maintaining. The ironic variance between the speaker's argument and the reader's understanding is what engenders the novel's dialogic aspect. For example, Marlow's description of his journey to the company

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proves to be false, but eventually incriminates or undermines the speaker himself, I call such incidents author's "betrayal" of his or her speaker.

headquarters office is an example of how the author reaches out for the reader without the speaker's awareness. Marlow's images are filled with death-images which foretell of his imminent ill-fated African journey:

> A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs knitting black wool. (13)

Although he fails to understand the foreboding implications of these somber, cemeterial images, the reader is able to comprehend their meaning and significance. Moreover, Marlow's description of the two women "knitting black wool" becomes a medium through which the author establishes an indirect relationship with the reader via the speaker (Marlow) without the latter's realization of this communication. Ian Watt points out the significance of this episode:

> The knitter's appearance increases this sense of the nonhuman; her shape recalls an umbrella and its tight black cover; there has been no effort to soften the functional contours of its hard and narrow ugliness with rhythmic movements, rounded forms, or pleasing colours. It is not that the knitter reminds us of the classical Fates which really matters, but that she is herself a fate—a dehumanised death in life to herself and to others, and thus a prefiguring symbol of what the trading company does to its creatures. (325-26)

When Marlow studies the map in the office, he notices the colors indicating areas that have already been "discovered" or Europeanized, while those that are not, are colored in yellow. Marlow is captivated by these yellow areas: "however, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake. (13-14). The macabre images continue, but Marlow remains unaware of them. Even the other characters in the novel seem to have responded to the gloomy atmosphere of the narrative; as Marlow leaves the director's office, he is summoned by the secretary to sign some papers: "I found myself again in the waiting-

room with the compassionate secretary who full of desolation and sympathy made me sign some documents" (14). Conrad, through Marlow, foretells of the ill fate that awaits Marlow, who is incognizant of all this communication. By circumventing the speaker, the author here reaches out for the reader in a direct comment on the story. The novel is full of similar incidents that underscore the dialogic aspect of the narrative, such as the "white worsted round" the black boy's neck (19) and Kurtz's painting (27). "Every utterance," Bakhtin maintains, ". . . has its author, whom we hear in the very utterance as its creator" (*Problems* 184).

Failure to recognize irony in *Heart of Darkness* may lead to misreading the novel when the reader takes the speaker's words or the events at their face value. In such incidents of irony, the author betrays the speaker by having him or her deliver more than what he or she is capable of understanding, or by presenting a narrative that bears a significance beyond what the speaker intends. The author, by doing so, relies on the reader's understanding of what is beyond the speaker's words. When Marlow says something that he does not understand fully, or whose implications are unclear to him, he is betrayed by Conrad who uses him to reach out to the reader. To demonstrate this, I will refer to the two women in the novel, who are associated with Kurtz: the African woman and the Intended. In this part of the narrative, Marlow's lack of awareness of the irony in his story is evident. By observing the difference between the two women, the reader will recognize the irony in this difference, which escapes Marlow. Such failure to recognize the irony results in a misreading that can alter the meaning of the narrative. The portrayal of the two women underscores the author's voice behind Marlow's description.

Chenua Achebe, in his famous article "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," points out the parallel between the two women: the African woman is "a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman" (255). The contrast between the two women is indeed not between two characters in a story, or even between two persons, but rather between two concepts. They are representatives of their races or even their worlds. Their individuality is obscured by means of omitting their names and providing them with stereotypical, yet revealing

characteristics (such as physical description, clothes, and surroundings). Kurtz (till the end of his life) remains attached to both of them, and it is the dichotomy of the two interests/worlds that finally claims his life. Each of them, in return, seems to love him, or at least tries to win him to her side. The story then becomes not the oscillation of a man between two women/cultures but rather the struggle of the two cultures to claim a single man, thus reversing the usual love triangle. The black woman is described as a beautiful female, "savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent" (60). Though dressed in "barbarous ornaments,"(60) her presence overwhelms the European "pilgrims" and drive them all into a "formidable silence" (61). In an explicit sentence, Marlow/Conrad provides a larger-than-life portrait of this "wild" woman," indicating the obvious symbolic nature of this description:

> And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it has been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (60)

The African woman looks at the pilgrims "without a stir, and like the wilderness itself" (60). Finally, when she is killed at the hands of the pilgrims, she is united with the whole surroundings; she "stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the somber and glittering river" (67). Her death coincides with the disappearance of everything around Marlow, who "could see nothing more for smoke" (67). The natural scenery disappears in the unnatural gun smoke of the pilgrims' rifles, which also causes the disappearance (or irrelevance) of the African woman in this contexts. This symbolic disappearance of the African woman/world is once more revealed by an un-suspecting narrator to an observant reader.

By contrast, The quiet, plainly dressed European woman, the Intended, is described towards the end of the story. Her "mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, [and] for suffering" is associated with her "pale visage, [and] pure brow" (73). This women/world is surrounded by a "monumental" atmosphere (the marble fireplace, the piano, the luminous columns, etc.) only to contrast sharply with the Black women's/world's natural habitat (73). Her mournful air is distinguished from the lively colors of the black women's

ornaments. Marlow observes that she "carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow" (73) whereas the African woman treads "the earth proudly," carrying "her head high" (60). Marlow emphasizes the attachment to the real world which marks a bifurcation point between the two women/worlds vis-à-vis their ability to claim Kurtz.

The irony in the comparison between the African "mistress" and the European "Intended" is that their episodes are delivered by Marlow who is not aware of the significance of what that comparison entails as explained above. Marlow is the narrator of Kurtz's tragedy, which in a sense is Marlow's as well. Marlow's lack of awareness is further emphasized by the fact that he resembles Kurtz in many ways. Marlow's mysterious, unexplainable fondness of, and later attachment to Kurtz suggests that Kurtz's ironic oscillation between the two woman—although one is more official or "intended" than the other—resembles Marlow's oscillation between his two love objects: discovering the empty spots on the map and remaining faithful to and secure in his "intended" home. Like Kurtz, Marlow always yearns to return to his intended.

Dialogism, in Bakhtinian theory, is also found in the "seemingly" suppressed voices of the auditor(s) in the novel. Their voices seem to be silenced by the author, yet, as the narrator speaks, the reader becomes aware of the power which this silent auditor possesses over the speaker so much that we can hear the auditor's voice. This intercourse in a single-person-delivered narrative creates a dialogic discourse that runs throughout the story. The meaning of the novel is the result of our comparison between what the speaker says and how his or her auditor reacts. Ashton Nichols maintains that "our sense of the validity of the speaker's view emerges out of our sense of the auditor" (36-37). The speaker's words can only make sense when analyzed in accordance with the auditor's utterances (if given a chance to speak) or with his or her reactions to the speaker's words. Underscoring the importance of the auditor in a given conversation, V. N. Voloshinov maintains that "every utterance is the product of interaction between speakers and the product of the broader context of the whole complex social situation in which the utterance

emerges" (79). The lack of a conventional voice does not prevent the auditor from assuming an inward speech. In this case,

> nothing changes at all if, instead of outward speech, we are dealing with inner speech. Inner speech, too, assumes a listener and is oriented in its constitution toward that listener. (Voloshinov 79)

The auditors in *Heart of Darkness* are more than just four negligible listeners; their being a spur to the whole narrative makes them the cognitive factors against whom Marlow is valued. Their presence, and perhaps even their indifference to the narrative, compels Marlow to continue his story in order to arouse or retain their interest. He eventually challenges their personal values and European-oriented morals. The tension between Marlow and his interlocutors is established in the first few pages of the novel: "he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear (11). The auditors of Marlow's story are supposedly rational men (director of companies, lawyer, accountant, and the frame narrator). They are not named but rather described by their professions, except for the frame narrator who is neither named nor described. The dialogic influence of the auditors over the speaker is felt through the speaker's choice of words, construction of thoughts, and even reconsideration of events. Marlow once halts the narrative after a comment from one of the auditors and reconsiders his story. When one of the listeners interrupts Marlow by saying, "Try to be civil, Marlow," Marlow is forced to return "apologetically" to the story, forming it on less objectionable terms than those that drew the disapproval of the auditor (36). The end of *Heart of Darkness* is another incident of the speaker-auditor relationship; when Marlow meets the Intended and begins to tell her of Kurtz's last word, he interrupts his narrative "in a fright" because of an obvious reaction from the Intended, which ultimately compels him to alter his story and tells her that her name was Kutz's last word (75). The presence of the Intended is felt in his narrative without her direct intervention in it. In these examples the power of the auditor over the speaker is shown to have an effect in the narrative, causing the narrator to rethink his narrative and deliver it to the preference of the auditor.

The dialogic discourse of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* not only involves the speaker, the author, and the auditor, but also encompasses the reader in its sympathy/judgment process. This process engages the reader in order to permit him or her later in the narrative to make a judgement. Sympathy and judgment assume interaction with the characters and partaking in the utterances production, creating an expression of the reader's own, thus constituting an example of dialogism. As the narrative progresses, the reader's expressions are replaced one for another: the reader's sympathy towards Marlow and Kurtz is suspended towards the end of the novel where judgment is due. This dialogic relationship between the speaker of the narrative (Marlow) and the reader manifests itself in the speaker's choice of words, order of events, and duration and pattern of the narrative. "The consciousness of other people," Bakhtin maintains, "cannot be perceived, analyzed, [or] defined as objects or as things—one can only *relate to them dialogically*" (68, emphasis is Bakhtin's). In order to analyze the speaker's consciousness we must have access to him or her dialogically: our presence, as readers, must be felt and reflected in the language of the speaker. The speaker-reader relationship in *Heart of Darkness* permits the reader to sympathize with Marlow. This sympathy is essential in understanding his character and finally judging him. Unlike the other characters who judge Marlow, including the auditors, the reader arrives at his or her judgement via the sympathy towards Marlow. Readers in general feel

> considerable sympathy for Marlow as a man who found himself on a mission more problematic than the one he had signed up for and who had to decide whether this new mission still commanded his loyalty. (Harpham 39)

Although Marlow mixes sympathy with judgment (perhaps intentionally), such as in the end of the novel when he justifies his lying to the Intended, "It would have been too dark—too dark altogether," the reader is not persuaded by this justification in his or her judgement of Marlow (76).

The reader may have an effect on the author through the speaker's narrative. It is, of course, obvious that the author produces the narrative before the reader's influence, but authors do

not work in a vacuum; they operate in accordance with binding social mores that force them to anticipate and, somewhat, acquiesce to the readers' expectations. Consequently, critics who read *Heart of Darkness* with postcolonial interpretations rely on this dialogic relationship between the author and the reader to support their colonial discourse: viewing the story as Conrad's portrayal of the imperial notions of Victorian England at an age when colonial fervent is waning. Among such critics is Achebe, who read *Heart of Darkness* as an incriminating factor not only against Conrad but also against Victorian England and Colonial Europe in general. *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe declares, projects "the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" (252) to an audience that shares its colonial implications because "white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" (257). Similarly, C. P. Sarvan emphasizes that Conrad "reflects to some degree the attitudes of his age" in the colonial depiction of Africa (284-85). However, it is not fully accurate to claim that Conrad's text is as "colonial" or "racist" as other texts by authors such as Rudyard Kipling, Macaulay, or Edward William Lane, who helped establish the colonial discourse of the 19th century with its known parameters. Conrad's attitude towards the colonial experience, however, may have reflected the position of elitist Victorian England who still believed in the civilizing mission of the European powers, but refused to use brute force in the peripheries to enforce it. This group includes authors such as Conrad, George Orwell, and Graham Greene who rejected colonialism but embraced cultural imperialism and Eurocentric hegemony [1].

Conrad in his novel relates to, and is partially influenced by a set of abstract ideologies as well as concrete realities and policies. Therefore, it is inevitable for the reader and the author to interact. Conrad, in his anticipation of his audience's notion(s) about

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(1) Some authors use the two terms "imperialism" and "colonialism" interchangeably; I make a distinction between them in the sense that the former indicates the European sense of projecting one to have the right to interfere in the affairs of others. The latter, however, is the military phase of the former.

imperialism, produces a text that is the result of the cultural compromise and mental negotiation between his personal beliefs and the accepted, or in this case the rapidly developing, social notions about colonialism/imperialism. The value of the novel stems from the fact it reflects or opposes the Victorian social notions. In either case of the argument (either for or against the European presence in Africa) the reader remains in the middle of the narrative for his or her "voice" is taken into consideration during the writing process.

The polyphonic nature of *Heart of Darkness* includes the dialogic relationships between the speaker, Marlow, and his own words. A dual voice may arise from a single utterance because "dialogic relationships," as Bakhtin affirms, "are also possible toward one's own utterance as a whole, toward its separate parts and toward an individual word within it" (184). It is, therefore, possible to discern dialogism even in a single word:

> Dialogic relationships are possible not only among whole (relatively whole) utterances; a dialogic approach is possible toward any signifying part of an utterance, even toward an individual word, if that word is perceived not as the impersonal word of language but as a sign of someone else's semantic position, as the representative of another person's utterance; that is, if we hear in it someone else's voice. (Bakhtin, *Problems* 184)

When Kurtz dies he repeats: "The horror! The horror!" (68). The significance of this utterance is that it is deliberately made vague as to who utters it, and thus it could be voiced by any one of those who are involved in Marlow's story. It even becomes unimportant as to who utters the phrase: Kurtz, Marlow, the frame narrator, the landscape, or even the reader. The dialogic aspect of the word "horror" is that we hear all of these different voices in it. Its referent is also as ambiguous as its source. It could refer to Kurtz's fate, to his whole experience, to Marlow's account, or to the white presence in black Africa. Critics have attributed so many sources and referents to this word that it seems comprehensive enough to be capable of carrying all the internal implications of this single utterance. Frances B. Singh, in his article "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*," maintains that the "horror" expressed here

refs to "the blackness of Kurtz's soul" (277). But it also refers to "what Kutz has done to the blacks and only secondarily to what he has done to himself" (Singh 277).

The complexity of the narrative style of *Heart of Darkness* permits the reader to discern a multitude of possibilities as to the work's implications. By utilizing the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism, we enable the text to speak in many different voices and have such voices interact with each other. These voices may not necessarily be all vocal in order to for them to be forceful in the narrative. These various vocal and non-vocal voices that belong to the speaker (Marlow), author, auditor, and reader produce a polyphonic result whose value depends on its variety and even "seemingly" lack of consistency. These voices are dissolved in order to create a single voice that, like stained glass, creates from heterogeneous parts a whole that may seem at first glance discordant but proves in a second look to rely on this very heterogeneity in shape, size, and color to create a piece of art that is perfectly harmonious, aesthetic, and visually appealing.

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