

Sound Narrative of the Suppressed Species in *Heart of Darkness*

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Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* calls for the suppressed species on humanitarian grounds. In this sense, this paper aims to dredge how the suppressed species utter their voices of rebellion and form a special soundscape. The African natives make use of unique ways of drumming and shouting, to tell how they are enslaved and how they resist the domination of the British pilgrims. In the meanwhile, the black female also uses voices to rebel against her marginal condition compared to males, including white and her native males. By putting the story's sound narrative in the framework of ecofeminism, this paper intends to not only disclose the rebellious spirit of those suppressed species, but also raise people's awareness of caring for the living creatures in the marginal status, including women, the blacks, animals, and the ecological environment as a whole.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, sound narrative, ecofeminism, species

Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is an adventurous voyage story based on Conrad's experiences aboard the steamship *Roi des Belges* on the Congo River in 1890. This story starts with the scene in which Marlow begins his journey to the African continent in search of Kurtz, an Ivory agent of the British Empire. In his journey, meeting with all sorts of crime and evil with horrible ferociousness and massacre, he reflects on morality and humanity lying in the zenith of the Victorian age.

Conrad and his *Heart of Darkness* provoked some kind of controversy. According to Achebe (1978), Conrad is even considered as a "racist" projecting the image of Africa as "the other world" in opposition to the European world. To some extent, *Heart of Darkness* expresses the ego and prejudice of Conrad and the British Empire (pp. 1-15). However, in this novella Conrad's humanitarian spirit emerges from all corners of this story. He shows sympathy for the suffering of Africans and condemnation of Kurtz and those pilgrims' atrocities, penetrating introspection on himself. In this story, Conrad constantly shifts his perspective radically and questions the western culture and civilization.

To some extent, the darkness of this story lies in the evil of human nature. As criticized by Birgit Maier-Katkin and Daniel Maier-Katkin (2004), *Heart of Darkness* "addresses the problem of evil in an environment dominated by crime against humanity" (p. 584). Furthermore, this novella "contains three representations of evil: the base, primitive, perverse allure of lust and greed in the deepest recesses of the human psyche and it is ordinary people whose silence and denial allows evil to prosper" (p. 584). In some ways, this kind of comment should win part of praiseworthy which unmasks those hidden crimes and evil of those colonizers, such as Kurtz. Nevertheless, in this article, they merely analyze three crimes against humanity in this story, neither pinpointing the ways of them to solve this issue which hovers permanently in human society,

nor epitomizing the resistant spirit of his suppressed characters. As defined by McLuhan (2005), “the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium” (p. 4). In this sense, sound is what Conrad wants to deliver to readers in that he associates the African natives, British pilgrims with readers by utilizing the media of sound. In this story, I focus on the suppressed species, the African natives, and females. By studying the sound narrative of these suppressed species, the paper intends to reveal the rebellion of them against crime and evil of the British colonizers.

The Outer Frame of African Voices of Resistance

This story is stamped with oppression from different people’s voices, particularly those resistant voices of the suppressed African natives. Friday is depicted as a tractable and silent “other” by Daniel Defoe. Unlike Defoe, African natives in Conrad’s writing are not silent. The reason for Conrad to utilize “sound narrative” to convey that rebellion deserves exploration. Based on the idea of Fu Xiuyan (2015), “sounds are classified into two main types on account of different subjects: sounds of nature and voices of human beings” (pp. 60-63). In the meantime, he and Liu Bizhen (2017) also figure out that sounds can be interpreted in the following parts: “the meaning of sounds, the reason of sounds, and sounds themselves” (pp. 110-112). This paper intends to explore the profound meanings of sounds which Conrad aims to convey.

As J. C. Carothers (1959) maintains, “European citizens mainly live in a society where they highlight the importance of the cold and offish visual feast. Nevertheless, the world which the African natives reside in is aural-dominated full of ardent and highly aesthetic” (p. 22). Therefore, with more amiability and refreshing candidness, the African natives are inclined to express their feelings and emotions straightforwardly in utilizing their auditory organ. This is the reason for Conrad applying sound narrative to manifest the African natives’ rebellious spirit in this story. For British colonizers and pilgrims, in a “mournful, gloom, brooding motionless” and death densely covered African continent, hearing becomes a fatal and crucial tool for having a subtle observation of the forest so that they are capable of keeping safe and sound (Conrad, 1899, p. 3). For the African natives, sound as a unique way is used to exclaim their resistance towards those British colonizes by streams of shouts, stamps, and rolls of drumming. In this sense, these British pilgrims are passive receivers in hearing while the African natives are the vigorous sponsors in that “an abrupt burst of yells, an overwhelming outbreak of a pent-up and mysterious frenzy, woke me up in a bewildered wonder” (p. 70).

Recently, there is an increasing tendency that people are heavily dependent on their visual sense, causing the problem of audio-visual imbalances. In 1920s, Eric McLuhan (2000) gives his attention to this question and bitterly criticizes audio-visual imbalances existing in western culture. And further, he pinpoints that the source of the problem resides in the perceptual habit of reading and writing in pinyin alphabet (p. 162). At last, creating a acoustic space different from visual space is his solution to this problem (pp. 364-368). In addition to this, what really gives the auditory space its academic meaning is R. M. Schafer (1978). In 1970s, he promoted the renowned world Soundscape project, laying a basic academic standard and solid theoretical foundation for the study of auditory culture. In this story, Conrad adds sounds to the process of the construction of his work and thought. For one thing, noises, sounds, and voices lie in this work further proving Conrad’s narrative gift. For another, Conrad makes his attempts to break the African natives’ or the suppressed species’ silence. To be clear, the African natives by using their resistant voices are trying to defend their national culture, creating a concept of national and cultural identity. Therefore, as one of the suppressed species, the African natives are not silent anymore and engage in resisting towards those arrogant and ferocious British pilgrims by their

powerful sound. In this sense, the African natives defend not so much their homeland as their sacred culture. In 21th century, acoustic narrative began to swerve into literary research. In this work, when the African natives hear the sound of siren, they immediately move into a defensive posture. However, after hearing rolls of drums and shouts, Marlow and his pilgrim fellows scare to death and take actions to protect themselves. In this sense, “ears offer a more inclusive view of the world than eyes do” (1899, p. 456) which is put forward by Cady-Keane (2007).

There are two clues of African natives’ resistant voices in the story. In the outer frame, a narrative clue lies in Marlow and a great number of pilgrims who sail from the exterior into the interior of the African continent. Along the way, rolls of drums and shouts express African natives’ rebellious spirits, rising into their minds every now and then. At the outset,

at night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day; But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping. (Conrad, 1899, p. 38)

All sorts of voices and noises emitted by the suppressed African natives are used to vent their state of mourn and anger. In Conrad’s story, it is these drums, shouts, clapping, and the noise of feet behind the drapery trees along the river that make these pilgrims and Marlow tremble with fear. And likewise, the Africans express their opposition to the invasion of their homeland by utilizing the media of sound in such a special way.

When these British pilgrims enter into the depth of the African continent, the resistant voices are rising once more.

Suddenly round the corner of the house a group of men appeared as though they had come up from the ground. They waded waist-deep in the grass, in a compact body, bearing an improvised stretcher in their midst. Instantly, in the emptiness of the landscape, a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still like a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land; and as if by enchantment, streams of human beings-of naked human beings-with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest. (Conrad, 1899, p. 64)

These cries of these “black savages” imply that they are to guard against Marlow and any British pilgrim at the door. The reason for African natives treating Marlow and British pilgrims as enemies is that they are enslaved to death by British colonizers. Africans are deemed as “dumb brutes (animals) who assess rudimentary soul savages in a frenzy” (Achebe, 2014, *An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of darkness*, p. 119). If these British pilgrims come here for mere cultural exchange and cooperation, instead of holding an eager desire: “To make money, of course” (Conrad, 1899, p. 21) at the expense of these African natives, and thus, that cold and defensive treatment befall them, the noise, the roar, the immediacy and urgency of all the dynamic challenges they face will simply be too idiosyncratic.

When Marlow and European pilgrims are about to deviate from the African continent, those African natives take actions to express their resistance towards British pilgrims.

They faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce river demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendent tail-something that looked like a dried gourd; they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language, and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the response of some satanic litany. (Conrad, 1899, p. 73)

Such voices exclaimed by these suppressed Africans are a sort of cheers for victory with high spirit in that

they expel those settlers and defend both their homeland and themselves.

The Inner Frame of African Voices of Resistance

In the inner frame, African resistant voices are expressed through the scope and intensity of resistance. At the very beginning of this story, rolls of drums are beating faintly and remotely so that they can be heard dimly. According to physics, sound is a vibration that travels through the air or another medium to understand the world. In this regard, these African natives utter their complaint and sorrow by drumming on and off. As the story progresses, “suddenly there was a growing murmur of voices and a great tramping feet” (Conrad, 1899, p. 20), which implies that the approaching resistant voices become much stronger and more urgent. But such voices of rebellion are with regularity. Further on, streams of shouts and rolls of drumming are becoming much more frequent and fiercer, but do not convey an imminent attack. As the story gradually develops: “A cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation; so suddenly, and apparently from all sides in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking” (p. 43). In this sentence, such words as “apparently, all sides, outbreak, intolerably” indicate that the resistance of the African natives becomes much more intense than before.

As stated above, the approaching streams of shouts, stamping, and drumming ring from one place to all sides, from afar and to nearby, which represents the African natives’ rebellious spirit. Likewise, the African resistant voices become more widespread and intense until the departure of Marlow, Kurtz, and other European pilgrims. In this sense, Joseph Conrad, in his *Heart of Darkness* advocates for the suppressed species by utilizing the sound narrative.

The Fresh Resistant Voices of a Black Woman

Besides the resistant voices above, an African woman’s rebellious voice also deserves attention. Wei Qingqi and Li Jialuan (2019) believe that the suppressed species include “nature, female, the Orient, all people of color, the exploited, the developing countries, etc.” (p. 18). Since ancient times, women have been regarded as “the other”. In her monograph *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1956) argues that:

in actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (p. 15)

In such a society constructed by patriarchal culture, women have been subordinated to men. “Conrad allows women scarcely any narratological or thematic attention in *Heart of Darkness*” (McIntire, 2002, p. 257). Women are in a marginal and unprivileged situation where they deem themselves as such a “born worthless objects” that they are really inferior to men and should endure endless abuse of men. However, in the story, an African woman is described to be “draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments” (Conrad, 1899, p. 66). That sound of jingle implies such woman as the black woman with a high rank is still being oppressed by males. But the most inspiring point is that Conrad makes women utter rebellious voices. The following two parts are about how this black woman makes her resistant voice heard.

Though having a deep affection towards Kurtz, that black woman still yells at him, unlike Kurtz’s “intended”, who deems Kurtz as a deity: “He drew man towards him by what was best in them”; “it is the gift of the great” (Conrad, 1899, p. 82). Although Kurtz’s “intended” is a white woman, yet this white woman is unaware of and lacks of the rebellious spirit. Therefore, Conrad reflects on the false ideology of white

supremacy for the suppressed species assessing brilliance of humanity as white man simultaneously.

When Kurtz is about to leave, ignoring her male fellows' resentful eyes, the African woman conveys her love towards Kurtz by shouts. "She put out her hands, shouted something, and all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance" (Conrad, 1899, p. 73). Under such a circumstance, her shouts are representatives of her deep affection on Kurtz as well as her rebellious spirit against her male fellows' oppression. Her action is similar to the female character Shug, an independent and self-confident woman who is brave to encourage other females to pursue self-liberation and integrity in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Conclusion

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a realistic history of western powers predominating over Africa, African natives, African ecological environment, and local culture, treating all of them as "others". Therefore, they are put in a marginal condition on the chopping block, much less to possessing any liberty, human rights, and happiness. Nevertheless, the profound and touching point is that Conrad expresses those African natives' rebellious voices so that they are capable of being heard and as readers; we can reflect on their power and meaning. These voices represent the rebellious spirit of the suppressed species and create a special soundscape of resistance. And in the meanwhile, from this aspect of sound narrative to study this work, this paper makes some attempts to correct the concept that serious audio-visual effect has been out of balance rooted in western culture. In this way, Conrad reflects on the culture of the supreme powers and advocates for those suppressed species.

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