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## THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION: JOSEPH CONRAD AND NGUGI WA THIONG'O IN DIALOGUE

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The foundation of Empire is Art and Science. Remove them,  
or degrade them, and the Empire is no more. Empire follows  
Art, and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose.

– William Blake

THE imperial quest<sup>1</sup> of the 19<sup>th</sup> century superpowers was unprecedented in human history. By 1914, Europe held “a grand total of roughly 85 percent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths” (Said 1994, 8). Both imperialism and colonialism were driven and supported by an impressive ideological platform that sustained and fed the system. The rightfulness associated with the expansivity of colonial powers was conveniently derived from the notions of inferiority and backwardness that were attributed to the populations of the newly acquired territories; these, in fact, not only helped to justify the massive geographical extension of the empire but also created the illusion of legitimacy of the whole process. According to imperial policies, some nations and territories simply seemed to be in need of domination and control; they required regulation and direction, both political and cultural. The self-imposed right to execute a civilizing mission in Third World countries, conducted in order to enlighten and humanize indigenous communities, thus logically presupposed the cultural, economic, political and even moral superiority of the colonizer.

As Homi Bhabha points out, imperial discourse was characterized primarily by “its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (1983, 37). It operated on the premises of a rigid ideological identification which

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1. For the purposes of this article, the focus will be placed predominantly on British imperial policies.

sought to establish firm boundaries between the imperial authority and the subjugated people. Delineated as the other, the colonized subject was repeatedly represented as “radically different from the self” (Ashcroft et al. 2004, 102), which, on the other hand, consequently validated the dominant position of the self. Such an identification of the colonizer-colonized dynamics, however, required a constant reiteration of the difference between *us* and *them* and a repeated use of adequate stereotypes which de facto contributed to the abovementioned fixity of the imperial discourse. In other words, the imperial process assumed and nurtured the existence of static identities of those involved; hence it was able to maintain a desired distribution of power and control.

In *The Economy of Manichean Allegory*, Abdul R. JanMohamed (1985) explores the opposition between the colonizer and the colonized, i.e. the other, and points out the rather limited forms of interaction and understanding. “If he [the colonizer] assumes that he and the Other are essentially identical, then he would tend to ignore the significant divergences and to judge the Other according to his own cultural values. If, on the other hand, he assumes that the Other is irremediably different, then he would have little incentive to adopt the viewpoint of that alterity: he would again tend to turn to the security of his own cultural perspective” (18). Consequently, JanMohamed (1985) deems it almost impossible for the colonizer (i.e. the self) to comprehend the other since in both cases the self is not capable of ignoring or negating its own cultural formation that constitutes its point of departure. Whatever production results from such an interaction will then necessarily “affirm its own ethnocentric assumptions” (19).

It is a well-known fact that imperial domination and authority was established and maintained not only with guns and administrative apparatus but also with the written word. Literary works, among other textual forms utilized by imperial authorities, operated as disseminators of imperial ideology, projecting images of both the *civilized* Europeans and the colonial subjects thought to be in need of civilizing. Though “the main battle in imperialism is over land,” the issues of “who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future” were “reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in nar-

rative" (Said 1994, xiii). To recognize the significance of textuality in colonial context, one may also quote Elleke Boehmer who designates the text as "a vehicle of imperial authority" which "performed the act of taking possession." Literature thus became a vital tool for "the exchange of colonial images and ideals" (Boehmer 2005, 14–5), validating imperial ambitions through textual representations of the unknown.

It was through novels that distant, unfamiliar places were introduced to the audience back home, with authors trying to make sense of and interpret the unknown. While doing so, they often opted for a framework of familiar imagery which facilitated their articulation of the other. Moreover, colonial writings also reflected conventional imperialist fabrications associated with the non-European, i.e. uncivilized, population and captured the essence of imperialist discourse. The natives of far-flung countries were frequently portrayed in an antagonistic way; their characterization did not transcend the stereotypical imperial binarism of the self and the other. In his incensed critique of Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe provides a list of Conrad's unflattering references to African people which included expressions like "prehistoric man", "ugly", "inhuman", "savage" or "rudimentary souls" (1977). Kipling's infamous poem *The White Man's Burden* refers to the "captives" as "sullen peoples, Half devil and half child", while in *The Overland Mail* the native runner bringing mail to the British exiles in India is reduced only to "a speck on the hillside, a dot on the road".

When viewed from the postcolonial perspective, such portrayals are regarded as testimonies of imperial supremacy. Quoting JanMohamed (1985), "[w]hile the surface of each colonialist text purports to represent specific encounters with specific varieties of the racial Other, the subtext valorizes the superiority of European cultures, of the collective process that has mediated that representation" (19). It was in writing then that "the view of the world as directed from the colonial metropolis was consolidated and confirmed" (Boehmer 2005, 15). Therefore, when examining literary works of the imperial era, one has to read them against the historical and political backdrop. The writers were inherently and inevitably embedded in the imperial process and though they might not have been "mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic his-

tory", they were "very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure" (Said 1994, xxii).<sup>2</sup>

The somewhat problematic positioning of colonial writers, as implied by Said's statement, might be best exemplified by the writing of Joseph Conrad, who is probably the most discussed author in the context of (post)colonial literary studies. Adam Hochschild (1998) describes *The Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's best known work, as "one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all literature" (146), while Chinua Achebe unashamedly calls Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist"<sup>3</sup> in his condemnation of Conrad's portrayal of Africa and its inhabitants. Celebrated for his literary talent and relentless criticism of imperialism by many, scorned for his demeaning portrayals of indigenous people by others, the response to Conrad's work epitomizes the contradictions and ambiguities associated with the position of colonial writers in both literary and social context.

Nevertheless, Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*, situated in the Belgian Congo (although unnamed in the book), is one of the most discussed literary texts produced by the empire. Centred on the adventures of Charles Marlow, a British seaman in Africa, Conrad's focus is both on the colonial mind-set and the consequences of European colonialism. Guided by the powerful stream of the Thames into the unfamiliar waters of the Congo, Marlow's journey into the heart of the African continent mimics the glorious imperial quest that preceded him and supposedly turned the dark place into a beacon of light. As the story progresses, however, and the reader is introduced to Kurtz, the

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2. See, for example, Alfred Tennyson's defense of the empire in his poem "To the Queen":

The loyal to their crown  
Are loyal to their own far sons, who love  
Our ocean-empire with her boundless homes  
For ever-broadening England, and her throne  
In our vast Orient, and one isle, one isle,  
That knows not her own greatness: if she knows  
And dreads it we are fall'n.

(Available at: <http://library.sc.edu/spcoll/britlit/tenn/2queen2.html>)

3. Available at: <http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html>

mysterious chief of the Inner Station, one begins to question the real location of darkness. As a matter of fact, while the novel definitely proffers an imperialist vision of the world and does not swerve from the imperial ideological framework when depicting the natives, it is also clear in articulating doubts about the colonial project which are embodied by Kurtz's character<sup>4</sup>. The often glorified process of civilizing the dark places of the world is thus exposed as a ruthless practice of domination and exploitation.

The inconsistent response of literary scholars towards *The Heart of Darkness* results primarily from Conrad's portrayal of the colony (the main focus of my analysis for the purpose of this paper); it is manifested in the discrepant attitude of the protagonist to the native population which oscillates between a seeming inclination and repugnance. While Marlow occasionally shows signs of affection towards the natives, he is not able to overcome the influential imperial mind-set that has shaped him. Therefore, when referring to the indigenous population of the almost impenetrable jungle, the narrator uses expressions such as "dusty niggers" (Conrad 1994, 26), "savages" (27), "the prehistoric man" (51), "the devils of the land" (70), "brutes" (41) or "rudimentary souls" (72). Interestingly, "[a]ll the evil characteristics and habits with which the colonialist endows the native are . . . not presented as the products of social and cultural difference but as characteristics inherent in the race—in the 'blood'—of the native" (JanMohamed 1985, 20-1).

Moreover, the representation of the natives repeatedly amounts only to "a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling" or to "streams of human beings—of naked human beings—with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements" (Conrad 1994, 51, 85). This notoriously known passage from the book sums up Marlow's viewpoint.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—

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3. As Said notes, "Conrad's audience was European, and his fiction had the effect not of challenging but of confirming that fact and consolidating consciousness of it, even though paradoxically his own corrosive skepticism was thereby released" (1994, 166).

there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. (Conrad 1994, 51)

Clearly, the natives, i.e. the other, are often subject to a dehumanized or non-individualized group depiction, they are presented as silent subjects as if excluded from humanity completely. In the context of postcolonial discourse, such a representation of the colonized people implies a clear dissociation and differentiation of the European civilization from this entity and only accentuates the traditional self-other dichotomy. Although Marlow contemplates the idea of a distant kinship with the natives, his opposing commentaries complicate his role as an advocate of enlightening and revolutionary ideas. “Marlow’s narrative takes the African experience as further acknowledgment of Europe’s world significance; Africa recedes in integral meaning, as if with Kurtz’s passing it had once again become the blankness his imperial will had sought to overcome” (Said 1994, 165).

Similarly, the African continent is represented as a dark, monstrous wilderness, “a prehistoric earth” (Said 1994, 165) where moral principles are seen as a rather unnecessary luxury. Kurtz’s story exemplifies the power of the African jungle; its untamed nature liberates the man from his obligations to stick to a moral code and eventually drives him out of his mind. The dissociation of Africa from the civilized and enlightened world enables the colonizers to view the continent as a place where anything is possible. Prior to his first meeting with Kurtz, Marlow overhears a conversation between two men discussing Kurtz and his ivory business. Part of that conversation refers to the problem of competition in the following way: “‘We will not be free from unfair competition till one of these fellows is hanged for an example,’ he said. ‘Certainly,’ grunted the other; ‘get him hanged! Why not? Anything—anything can be done in

this country”<sup>5</sup> (Said 1994, 46). Unlike the station established by the Europeans which should function as “beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing” (Said 1994, 47), the colonized territory is seen as its antithesis, a place where morals and virtues are either redundant or eradicated.

The moral decline is best exemplified by Kurtz himself. “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (Said 1994, 71), as the narrator informs us, and thus the chief of the Inner Station represents the perfect product of the imperial era. A man of many talents and an irresistible charisma, Kurtz proves to be a great leader and the story of his success in Africa precedes his name. Just like Marlow, however, the character of Kurtz is also shrouded in mystery. Appearing in fragments throughout the story, constructed by the different impressions of people who know him, Kurtz’s personality remains elusive till the end. As his report for the International Society for Suppression of Savage Customs shows, Kurtz started his mission with a clearly defined vision of the colonizer-colonized dynamics. “He began with the argument that we whites . . . ‘must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity . . . By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (Said 1994, 71–2). His report aptly verbalizes the idea of European superiority as well as the missionary aspect of the whole process.

However, Kurtz’s report concludes with a postscriptum – “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Said 1994, 72) – which renders his moral disintegration indisputable. Although the question raised by the text – of who is responsible for his moral degeneration – is left unanswered. On one hand, Kurtz’s transformation may have resulted from the debilitating darkness (metaphorically speaking) of his surroundings, of the barbaric African wilderness depriving him of reason. It might have been caused by the influence of the prehistoric earth, the primitive savages or the lack of civilization. Yet Kurtz can also be regarded as a victim of the imperial enterprise which in itself, as the story manifests, is based on a destructive and mistaken guidance. In that sense,

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4. This line might be also interpreted as Conrad’s criticism of the colonizing process since it unmasks the moral degradation of the businessmen involved in it.



Conrad might be unmasking the true nature of colonialism and its dire consequences, both for those actively involved in the process and those colonized.

As mentioned before, even several decades after it was published, the literary community does not seem to be able to reach consensus when it comes to interpreting the message of *The Heart of Darkness*. The contradictory responses to Conrad's text simply reflect the ambiguity of the text itself. While there are many, Cedric Watts for example, who defend the novel and claim that Conrad is debunking the myths of inevitable progress, of European superiority and that of the empire being an altruistic enterprise (Watts 1983, 197), others, like Chinua Achebe, are vehemently against such assertions. "Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths" (Achebe 1977). Edward Said might have discovered a middle ground when he deemed Conrad "both anti-imperialist and imperialist, progressive when it came to rendering fearlessly and pessimistically the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of overseas domination, deeply reactionary when it came to conceding that Africa or South America could ever have had an independent history or culture, which the imperialists violently disturbed but by which they were ultimately defeated" (1994, xviii). Nevertheless, it is the implications of colonial textuality, such as those presented in Conrad's text, which encouraged the *other* side to respond and produce its own narrative.

In its essence, postcolonial literature has evolved as a reaction to historical, political and cultural implications of colonial writings and has focused on providing a counter discourse to the prevalent imagery and associations related to the colonized peoples that were, for decades, embedded in colonial literature. The writers vowed to talk back, to challenge the imperial discourse and exonerate whole communities that have been marked by the impact of unflattering imperial ideology. The silenced other was now raising its voice while avidly disputing the rigid identification framework introduced and nourished by the imperial enterprise. The security of prevalent stereotypes and clichés, from which the imperial mission derived its authority and justification, was thus disrupted and eventually sup-

planted by new tropes. The rigid self vs. the other differentiation, encoded in colonial literature, was dismantled as the imperial era and its *actors* were presented from the opposite perspective.

Opposition, however, does not necessarily guarantee complexity of the new perspective. Especially in its early stages, postcolonial writing, often utilized for political purposes, suffered from a similar amount of stereotypization and schematism as can be found in colonial literature. In the pre-independence period, literature became a vital tool of political resistance, conjuring images of unified communities and shared cultural heritage intending to raise national awareness and mobilize the communities. The characterization of the protagonists was frequently symbolical and typological rather than psychological since the characters operated in a much larger context than the literary one. Thus, the political motivation of the authors necessarily influenced the whole structure and texture of the novel as they succumbed to the very vices of ideological agenda.

In the context of African literature, from the 1930s onwards, writers' commitment to social and political issues was regarded by many intellectuals as a moral duty. In the words of Chinua Achebe, "an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant—like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames" (Achebe 1968). The pre-independence period in particular, called for activism and involvement and many African writers were using literature as "a weapon of political liberation," enlisting their work in the anti-colonialist cause (Boehmer 2005, 175). There was an agreement that literature should be representative of the "moving spirit in the nationalist struggle" (*ibid.*) and that it should facilitate a much needed social transformation. Writers were seen as "beacons, soothsayers, and seers of political movements" and therefore it was "the writer's role to reinterpret the world, to grasp the initiative in cultural self-definition" (Boehmer 2005, 176). It was through literature that traditional and communal relationships were recreated and the European projections of the colonized subjects were antagonized.

The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was a particularly passionate activist in the area of national redefinition and regeneration. In his book of essays *Writers in Politics*, Ngũgĩ comments on the connection between literature and politics as follows: "A writer's subject matter is history: i.e. the process of man acting on nature and changing it and in so doing acting on and changing himself. The entire changing relations of production and hence the changing power relations consequent on mutable modes of production is a whole territory of a writer's literary concern. Politics is hence part and parcel of this literary territory" (Thiong'o 1981, 72). Literature is then seen not only as a medium which reflects social reality but rather as a creative process that is conditioned by historical social forces and pressures. "[I]t cannot elect to stand above or transcend economic, politics, class, race or what Achebe calls 'the burning issue of the day' because those very burning issues with which it deals take place within an economic, political, class and race context" (Thiong'o 1981, 6).

Such a view of the novel, emphasizing its social engagement and function in a political context, however, will inevitably impact its poetics. If a narrative is created within a specific ideological framework, its fundamental elements, characterization included, will be bent and shaped accordingly. In this sense, literature becomes appreciated not only for its aesthetic qualities (though these do not necessarily have to be neglected or affected) but especially for its potential to transmit ideas and reach a large audience. In other words, political agenda might take precedence over such qualities as aesthetics or complexity and literature is used as a tool of political and social empowerment. In the case of early postcolonial literature, one may notice similar tendencies. In their attempt to provide a counter narrative towards colonial writing, and to colonial domination as such, some writers succumbed to the power of a limiting black-and-white rhetoric, especially in the area of representation and character portrayal.

Therefore, Ngũgĩ's early novel *The River Between* (1965), "a text born in the throes of the problematic nationalist discourse of the early 1960s" (Ogude 1999, 19), can be read in conjunction with Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. Though they may not share many similarities at first sight, the Kenyan writer, an ardent political activist, might in fact be engaged in an intense

dialogue with Conrad's novel (as will be demonstrated in the following paragraphs). The novel unfolds during an earlier stage of the British colonization of Kenya, soon after the arrival of the colonizers, and maps the gradual transformation of a community under the influence of British missionaries. It centres on a young man, Waiyaki, who is working hard to reconcile two opposing groups—one that is led by Joshua, an ardent convert to Christianity, and the other who is advocating a return to tribal practices. Waiyaki's failed attempts to reach reconciliation and unite the community highlight Ngũgĩ's pessimistic vision of cultural syncretism.

Ngũgĩ's novel opens with an evocative description of the Honia river, the river of the book's title, which instantly creates an impressive physical setting. As in Conrad's text, the river is personified; its depiction constitutes it as a living presence, vital for prosperous communal life. "Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes. And it went on in the same way, never hurrying, never hesitating. People saw this and were happy" (Thiong'o 1965, 1). One may recall Marlow's descriptions of the Congo River here, also personified in his account, yet portrayed in a rather menacing, ominous way. "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest . . . And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect" (Conrad 1994, 48–9).

Both texts construct their stories around the powerful presence of the river which guides the characters' actions and steers the readers' recognition. Creating a framework for the narratives, they drive the stories forward but at the same time generate a larger understanding of the events described. Conrad's "mighty big river . . . resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land" (Conrad 1994, 12), is supplanted by a calming presence with healing powers in Ngũgĩ's novel. Completely contradicting Marlow's account of the Congo River, Honia brings peace of mind to the characters that come to its banks for comfort. Clearly, the dif-

ference in their depiction manifests a change of perspective; *The River Between* introduces the African view which was silenced in Conrad's narrative and provides an alternative vision of the African continent. The symbolic representations of the rivers are, in fact, emblematic of the dissimilar worldviews of these authors or the forces that formed them. Here, Ngũgĩ's imagery is entangled with indigenous mythology and is thus counterfeiting Conrad's imperialist presumptions representing the continent as a "prehistoric earth" posing threat and danger for those who dare to venture in it.

Similarly, character portrayal undergoes a dramatic shift in Ngũgĩ's novel. The mute, savage-like Africans of Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* find their counterparts in the inhabitants of the Kameno and Makuyu ridges. Communal identity is derived from the founding myth or the creation myth of the Gikuyu (recounted in several of Ngũgĩ's novels) and rich ancestral legacy, represented mainly by the prophet Mugo wa Kibiro, "Wachiori, the glorious warrior" and "Kamiri, the powerful magician" (Thiong'o 1965, 3). The opening passages of *The River Between* clearly oppose the colonialist representation of indigenous communities as ahistorical entities devoid of culture and social hierarchy; instead, they introduce a highly complex communal structure, deriving its identity from a rich cultural heritage. Thus, Conrad's dehumanized portrayals are starkly contrasted with an array of individualized characters functioning in an intricate social organization.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, the white man, the driving force of colonial literature—the storyteller, the adventurer, the bearer of light and culture—recedes into the background in *The River Between*. Mostly referred to only as "the white man" and thus presented as a simplified synecdoche for European colonialism, he is introduced in the opening chapters of the novel in a completely non-individualized way (mentioned only in relation to the prophecies of Mugo wa Kibiro and Waiyaki's father, Chege). Later, as the protagonist Waiyaki starts attending a missionary school, the white man is materialized in the character of Reverend Livingstone who again, is reduced to a few textual references. Described as "a man who had left home for a wild

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5. Ngũgĩ's novel displays a strong affinity to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in its insistence on an adequate representation of the indigenous culture and its practices.

country, fired by a dream of heroism and the vision of many new souls won for Christ through his own efforts" (Thiong'o 1965, 55), Livingstone's character is not allowed to overstep the clearly cut boundaries marked out for him. Ngũgĩ's portrayal of the colonizer is thus similarly reductive and schematic; the colonizer is in fact almost completely excluded from the narrative. Therefore, there is no space or opportunity for meaningful interaction or a psychologically complex depiction. By compressing "the colonizer's voice into some isolated figures within a sociopolitical landscape saturated by the native" (Ogude 1999, 50), Ngũgĩ achieves his anti-imperialist nationalism and refocuses the novel's scope on the repressed African perspective.

Although his actual presence is not crucial for the novel's development, his influence creates the backbone of its main conflict. While at first sight Kenya might seem to be devoid of a European presence, a closer look at the very conflicts within its society point to the traces of its cultural influence. The social divisions plaguing the two ridges result from the clashing worldviews and cultures brought about by European colonialism. Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, "the country of many ridges was left alone, unaffected by turbulent forces outside. These ancient hills and ridges were the heart and soul of the land. They kept the tribes' magic and rituals, pure and intact. Their people rejoiced together, giving one another the blood and warmth of their laughter" (Thiong'o 1965, 3). Now the ridges are like "two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region" (Thiong'o 1965, 1).

The geographical landscape of the novel, embodied by the two opposite ridges and the Honia river flowing between them, not only affects the structural organization of the novel but it also corresponds to the threefold division of the community. The ideological contrast of the ridges is embodied by their respective representatives – Joshua, an ardent Christian convert, and Kabonyi, a traditionalist and cultural purist, with Waiyaki, favouring cultural syncretism, functioning as a middleman. The novel focuses primarily on the problem of leadership which ignites the conflict between the men (each of them driven by different impetus), yet it is communal identity that is at stake here. In fact, *The River Between* captures the complexity of an intricate ideological battle that will shape the future of the whole com-

munity and hence is not to be taken lightly. It tackles the consequences of European imperial influence which results in radical rifts within the society.

The unambiguous typological identification of the main characters, along with the designation of their affinity to a particular ideological stance, enables the writer to orchestrate a symbolic battle of ideas. By adopting a Christian name and internalizing the rhetoric of the European colonizer, Joshua comes to personify the symbolic representation of the physically absent white man. A strictly principled person who is extremely devout to his adopted faith, Joshua preaches a definite break with the traditions of his community which he deems pagan and savage and warns against religious contamination. Condemning and repudiating all the rituals and traditions of the community, Joshua estranges himself from the tribal way of life that formed his childhood. He “clothed himself with a religion decorated and smeared with everything white”, “renounced his past and cut himself away from those life-giving traditions of the tribe” (Thiong’o 1965, 141). Evidently, Joshua becomes the *long arm* of the white man, the end product of his civilizing mission.

Joshua’s radical stance is antagonized by Kabonyi, “once Joshua’s follower and now the leading man among those who had broken ties with Siriana”<sup>7</sup> (Thiong’o 1965, 63), who is similarly revolutionary in his refusal of everything Christian. Though he attended a missionary school himself, Kabonyi eventually turned away from Joshua’s preaching and began to advocate a return to tribal traditions and rituals. Moreover, Kabonyi’s fight against Waiyaki is partially motivated by jealousy and his own egoistical ambitions which consequently lead to unfair practices and vengeful behaviour. His role in the narrative is distinctly delineated since Kabonyi represents the antagonistic force that opposes “Waiyaki’s suggestions on every possible occasion” (Thiong’o 1965, 81). Kabonyi’s destructive strategy compels Waiyaki, who constantly doubts his own authority, to articulate his vision of social reform more clearly.

Amidst these opposing camps stands Waiyaki, the supposed saviour of the community, who fights for the integration of the warring ridges. Educated in accordance with Living-

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6. The missionary center.

stone's ideas, Waiyaki's attempts at reconciliation stem from his belief in a syncretic solution. In his vision, the promise of a better future is tied to the concept of education and advancement which will secure communal harmony and unity. Waiyaki passionately reiterates the importance of schooling in the process of nation-building; he believes that knowledge "would uplift the tribe" so that "in the end the tribe would be strong enough, wise enough, to chase away the settlers and the missionaries" (Thiong'o 1965, 87). However, Waiyaki's vision, based on the eclectic combination of European education and tribal customs and wisdom, proves ineffectual as reconciliation and unity are not achieved.

Since the personal stories of Ngũgĩ's heroes always unfold on the background of the country's own struggle for existence, most of the central characters in his novels assume a symbolic role. Especially in the early novels, *The River Between* included, their function within the narrative tends to be clearly delineated right from the beginning. His characters seem to be predestined to become the leaders of their communities, either through the prophecies of tribal seers or through a self-imposed sense of duty. According to Ngũgĩ's beliefs, "[i]n the African way, the community serves the individual. And the individual finds the fullest development of his personality when he is working in and for the community as a whole" (Thiong'o quoted in Ogude 1999, 15). Waiyaki assumes the role of a saviour which was outlined for him by his ancestral lineage. This role is attributed to him early on in the story when his father Chege introduces him to Mugo's prophecy: "Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people" (Thiong'o 1965, 20).

Due to the prophecy, and the heavy use of foreshadowing (Ngũgĩ's literary trademark), Waiyaki's fate becomes quite predictable as he takes on the role imposed on him. He becomes the embodiment of anticolonial opposition, an authority that attempts to reconcile the two antagonistic ridges. "The myth helps Ngugi in articulating his theme of public responsibility which is seen as an educated man's burden that Waiyaki must take on." As a result, "Waiyaki has very little personal agency outside that cut out for him in nationalist rhetoric" (Ogude 1999, 69). The same holds true for the representatives of oppos-



ing forces—the British colonizers, missionaries or their converts. Joshua, for example, epitomizes the disruptive power of the European influence since he condemns tribal practices. “In Siriana he found a sanctuary and the white man’s power and magic . . . The new faith worked in him till it came to possess him wholly. He renounced his tribe’s magic, power and ritual” (Thiong’o 1965, 29). His role within the narrative is rather functional (just like Kabonyi’s) and fits into the simplistic polarization of the protagonists; hence, there is not much room for him to develop into a psychologically complex character.

In his early fiction Ngũgĩ’s protagonists evidently operate in a larger social and political context and since the author’s activism actively shaped his writing, certain elements of his narratives were necessarily impacted by it. As it was demonstrated, his representation of the colonizers is just as limiting and schematic as Conrad’s rendering of the African natives. There is little space delineated for a complex portrayal, nor are they given an opportunity to get engaged in a dialogue with the other party. Most of the time, the European settlers are reduced to an impersonal collective entity which starkly resembles Conrad’s own strategy. Such a role reversal occurred quite frequently in early postcolonial fiction, yet Ngũgĩ’s reductionist approach also did not spare the literary representatives of Africa. The ideological motivation behind his approach to characterization tends to reduce the complexity of his protagonists in a similar way. Because of the symbolic roles attributed to them within the narrative, their portrayal is equally restricted and limiting and encases the characters in a highly predictable structure. Though there are significant differences between Conrad’s and Ngũgĩ’s poetics, in the end neither of them seems to be able to escape a certain extent of stereotypization and reductionism in his writing.

It seems, therefore, that the question of literary representation remains a burning issue long after the decline of the empire; evidently, postcolonial writers, especially in the period preceding or shortly following the process of decolonization, grapple with its execution in a similar fashion. Though the articulation of imperial dichotomy of the self and the other (now presented from the opposite perspective, of course) does not have to be as overt as in, say, Kipling’s work, the more subtle techniques of perpetuating and disseminating adequate im-

agery or unbalanced characterization also contribute to the valorisation of the postcolonial counter discourse. In certain cases, postcolonial literature is equally simplifying and binary in its imagery as its colonial *antithesis* from which it fought to be disengaged in the first place. While the preserved self-other dichotomy enabled postcolonial writers to reconceptualise their identities and facilitated their articulation of communal or national objectives, its functional usage prevents early postcolonial literature from transcending the ideological framework.

In conclusion, it seems essential to come back to Edward Said's assertion concerning the positioning of writers within historical and social contexts. Just as Joseph Conrad and his contemporaries were inevitably embedded in the imperial enterprise and its mechanisms which dominated the era in which they lived, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was actively involved in the pre- and post-independence period that formed Kenya's public life in the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that sense, both writers were inevitably shaped by social occurrences and historical turning points which were, either consciously or unconsciously, reflected in their writing. Therefore, it seems vital, if not beneficial, to read their texts in conjunction with the events and influences that affected them. "[R]ather than condemning or ignoring [the novels'] participation in what was an unquestionable reality in their societies" and treating them as isolated object floating in a historical vacuum, one should learn from this aspect since it may "*enhance* our reading and understanding of them" (Said 1994, xiv).

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## ABSTRACT

The question of representation creates the backbone of postcolonial literary studies, since postcolonial literature came into fruition primarily as a reaction to the European portrayal of indigenous communities. Their literary representation in European fiction was often perceived as deformed and unjust. With the colonized subjects often portrayed in a non-individualized and dehumanized way, postcolonial literature set out to debunk those depictions by providing a fairer share of space and a more respectable approach to the presentation of the culture and the people of the extended imperial *family*. However, this paper seeks to argue that despite its effort to counterbalance the colonial discourse, early postcolonial fiction was far from being impartial. It seems to have suffered from a similar amount of stereotypization found in colonial writing and often failed to resist the temptation of ideological rhetoric. To illustrate the point, Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, one of the most discussed literary texts produced by the empire, is read in conjunction with *The River Between*, a novel written by the prominent Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. As the analysis demonstrates, in terms of characterization and portrayal, neither of them seems to be able to escape a certain extent of stereotypization and reductionism.

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