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Infernal Heavens: Narratives of Africa.
From Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to
Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*

Abstract: Situated at the intersection of literary studies and cultural studies, the present article looks at how fictional representations of Africa have evolved over the past century, from Conrad's canonical *Heart of Darkness*, which has unjustly become the landmark of colonial biased narratives of Africa despite the author's declared disengagement with his protagonists' perspectives, to Abdulrazak Gurnah's recent reverse rewriting of Marlow's journey, this time from the heart of darkness outward. Dwelling on the spatial metaphors of Heaven and Hell, this study argues that the two works under scrutiny put forward two essentially dichotomic representations of the same place, the African continent, which are largely dependent on the cultural environment and on cultural constraints. Whereas Conrad's infernal depiction of Africa relies mostly on Eurocentric stereotypes and on a personal experience whose horror mostly stemmed from a cultural shock produced by experiencing difference as evil, Gurnah's more complex and authentic depiction is a result of telling the story from within, as an insider, and reflecting on difference as productive diversity. In this respect, this study brings into discussion Ranjan Ghosh's recent dialogue with J. Hillis Miller on *Literature and Globalization* (2016) to argue that a transnational, transcultural and transdisciplinary approach to the narrative text would actually result in bridging the gap of classical binary difference and would emphasize the immanence of the literary text. Thus, Gurnah's *Paradise* reconstructs pre-WWI Africa from within, as a sum of lost Paradises which are by no means of Western extraction, while Conrad's canonical Inferno echoes the fears of an empire.
Keywords: Africa; identity; Joseph Conrad; Abdulrazak Gurnah; time; space; colonialism; globalization.

Introduction

The experience of time and space is profoundly humane, but also intensely humanizing. To our knowledge, no other species perceives time and space in such a complex, intricate yet personal manner. It would not be too much to say that the experience of time and space is defining to human identity and to being human altogether. The history of mankind provides a wide array of variables as well as approaches to the space-time continuum, depending on the historical, economic and cultural background. However, as varied as these are, they all seem to be interestingly circumscribed to a transcendental dimension that has over time materialized as either mythology or religion. The more primitive a society, the more sacred its time and space, which would in fact be indicative of the way in which the members of such a society perceive these dimensions as manifestations of a superior entity and will. In this respect, Eliade's extensive and elaborate studies on the sacred and the profane, for instance, constitute undoubtedly a solid account of how various communities across the world have approached and integrated the temporal and spatial coordinates. More recently, while tracing back a history of mankind in his 2011 *Sapiens,* Yuval Noah Harari also points to the cultural shifts that have marked the various perceptions of time and space in the evolution of the human species. It is interesting to observe thus that these perceptions have in fact followed the various stages of human evolution and have reflected the different dominant cultural ideologies. It is precisely here that the focus of this study lies: emphasizing the fact that cultural background strongly affects how time and space are constructed and reflected, as landscapes of the mind and cultural constructs rather than actual cartographies of specific places or moments.

If for primitive communities, time was circular, replicating thus the Earth's rotation around the Sun and generating elaborate mythological narratives that would explain the ways of the world, once mankind entered the theocratic phase, the perception of time became linear, in order to align with the powerful narrative of the emerging Almighty God: the fear of death and the promise of a fulfilling afterlife, if proper conditions were met. Time became synonymous with its implacable passing, while space had to conform to the rearrangement of mankind's fears and anxieties, but also needs. Both remained outside human reach and were represented and experienced as God's will, far beyond human intervention. In the theocratic West, Christianity consecrated the flow of time as God's divine punishment for Adam's and Eve's audacity to break His interdiction and eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Mortality came as a direct consequence of disobedience and knowledge in the Christian narrative, while the Garden of Eden became a utopian space forever refused to the human race, while the Earth turned into a place of suffering, penitence and repentance.

Ernst Becker's 1973 *The Denial of Death* provides a compelling account of how mankind's greatest fear, the fear of death, stands at the core of most master narratives, as the driving force which has pushed humanity to design and then achieve its most ambitious goals as immortality projects. Becker argues that culture itself, or the *cultured*

man, as he calls it, is a direct consequence of the terror of death which cultural constraints have managed to regulate, contain and finally appease (Becker 74). Amongst the various cultural layers that have historically obscured the death anxiety are also various consecrated constructions of time and space that people have imagined in order to secure their terrors. As antagonistic representations of afterlife, both Paradise and the Inferno have generically come to define mankind's unquenched thirst for immortality, which would rather materialize as eternal unspeakable ordeal in Hell than no Hell at all.

More recently, as Western culture has had to simultaneously digest the intensely traumatic experiences of the two World Wars, the Cold War and some more by proxy wars coupled with the intense experience of globalization, its representation of time and space and therefore of Paradise and the Inferno have significantly changed into what Manuel Castells calls *timeless time* and *the space of flows* (Castells 36). Consequently, both Paradise and the Inferno have been absorbed into the hectic, fragmented, simultaneous and erratic everyday experience of the (post)postmodern man. Fiction-wise, dystopia became the favorite mode of narration in the Western world. Thus, following the replacement of an entire well-established mythology of the soul with the more mundane concept of the self, dystopia compressed the spatio-temporal dimension into intensely disturbing mental landscapes of the future. Defamiliarization and alienation became synonymous with the classical Inferno. Suddenly, there was no room for Paradise.

Narratives of Africa. A few considerations.

There is a widely agreed upon misconception that globalization as a phenomenon only started as late as the 20th century and gained prominence in the 21st, with the advent of fast traveling and the Internet. However, looking back at mankind's history, it is obvious that, as a reality, globalization started much earlier and was triggered and fueled by traveling and trade. Since Antiquity, the circulation of people and goods facilitated the exposure to various other cultures, which then generated narratives about those cultures which eventually became solidified stereotypical representations of those cultures. Europe's economic hegemony since Antiquity has decidedly affected its narratives of the world. Economic and military power swiftly turned into powerful stories about the Other, as diverse as this Other was. Well-grounded in the classical mythological/religious ethos, binary opposition became the lens through which the immensity of the world was categorized, hierarchized and eventually contained. In the logic of either/or, the Other quickly became the savage, the evil, the less human, generating thus the premises for exploitation and discrimination in their many forms. Coextensively, the vast space inhabited by the Other was quickly contaminated with the attributes externally granted to this Other. Consequently, the Eurocentric narrative of otherness was the one that mapped the vast, unknown space of the Other as dark and evil.

As the very concept of otherness vastly relied on a binary vision of the world in which difference was understood as opposition and threat and therefore severely sanctioned, Africa was instantly dubbed as the *dark continent,* a place which came to

absorb the Eurocentric fears and anxieties, but also fascination. Over time, representations of Africa in European discourse were greatly dependent on the intensely biased colonial encounters with the other. More than often produced by outsiders, narratives of Africa go back as far as Greek and Roman Antiquity and represent a concoction of second-hand information from early explorers, legend, myth and misbelief which were supposed to cover for a symptomatic lack of knowledge about the continent. Gradually, all these narratives amounted to a relatively homogeneous representation of Africa as a dark, remote, mysterious and therefore threatening space that unequivocally became the reservoir of Eurocentric fears and anxieties, as well as a fascinating Terranova to be explored and then exploited. A Hell and Heaven at once.

It is precisely this alluring dichotomy that this study is set on investigating, as a conundrum of contradictions rooted in the same classical Western cultural paradigm and mostly resting on the Biblical master narrative of afterlife sacred spaces. Not places. In this respect, I believe that Conrad's (in)famous depiction of the *Heart of darkness* in 1899 and Abdulrazak Gurnah's 1994 *Paradise,* more than a century later, mark the significant evolution of how representations of Africa have evolved over time, encompassing the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism and transnationalism. Spatial metaphors of Africa have equally transitioned from relatively homogeneous infernal tropes generically circumscribed to the *dark continent* commonplace, to incredibly heterogenous and diverse paradises no longer tributary to the Eurocentric imaginary, as the Others started telling their own stories in a more authentic manner.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* Hell on Earth

Inspired from the writer's own journey to the Congo almost ten years before, Conrad's *fin de siècle* novella collates the most relevant narrative instances of Western infernal eschatology, from ancient Greek and Roman mythology to European Romanticism. Marlow's journey into the depth of a place that grows into an overpowering space is at once strongly reminiscent of Orpheus's descent into the Inferno to recover his beloved Eurydice, of Dante's epic journey into the nine circles of the Christian Hell, of Nerval's *Aurelie* and Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and, to go even further and beyond Western culture, of Ghilgamesh's desperate attempt to resurrect his best friend Enkidu by going down into the abyss of the other world. Without a doubt, Conrad's novella has unjustly turned over time into a poster of colonialism, flaunting memorable representations of Africa as a dark, threatening and dangerous space whose contours are nowhere in sight. A superficial reading would definitely allow – and it has – for the vilification of the author as an ambassador of colonialism and its deplorable consequences. However, on close reading, we discover that Conrad (de)construction of space which is obviously rooted in the Christian imaginary of the Inferno is strongly subversive. While openly acknowledging racism and racial exploitation through Marlow's narrative depiction of what seems to be for him hell on earth, Conrad refuses to condone with their authenticity. On the contrary, the writer subtly inserts several passages

where Marlow muses upon the morality of imperialism and colonialism:

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing after you look into it too much. (Conrad 9)

Or,

> 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. (Conrad 58)

Such passages contradict reductionist yet understandable postcolonial readings of Conrad's novella such as Chinua Achebe's 1975 public lecture *An Image of Africa,* which unapologetically concluded that "a novel that celebrates dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race" cannot be called a work of art (Achebe 258). Conversely, Conrad, far from celebrating dehumanization does in fact denounce it as the core of the Inferno that Marlow discovers deep in the heart of darkness. The compelling images of beastly indigens that Marlow encounters are modelled after Dante's infernal visions, pointing not, as many have argued, to the Africans' lack of humanity, but rather to that of the colonizer, the exploiter, the abuser. Mr. Kurtz epitomizes the Christian Satan, standing at the very heart of darkness, often defined as a faceless voice, as sheer eloquence, as a source of power. Beyond Marlow's admiration for Kurtz, the reader can detect Conrad's irony and sarcasm. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad 81) and his eloquence is supposed to channel all Europe's discourse about Africa as a land of "wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men," an obscure space that the white man got "a heavenly mission to civilize" (Conrad 8).

While tracing back the epistemological trajectory of the concept of space in his 1905 *Production of Space,* Henri Lefebvre points out that this is intimately connected to that of Western philosophy and episteme. Thus, while for Aristotle space and time were the abstract coordinates he employed in devising his categories, for Descartes and the philosophers who followed, space was that entity which, by containing all people and all objects, was either an attribute of divinity or immanent to the totality of everything that existed (Lefebvre 1). Even though Kant's philosophy is regarded as marking a shift in the philosophy of space, rendering it relative and instrumental, space is still conceived as an abstraction belonging to epistemology and a-priori to any human activity. Conrad's Africa seems to check all the above. Ambiguous and misleading, intentionally missing out on specific geographical references, Conrad's narrative elicits Eurocentric cultural references. Readers are required to solve the enigma of Marlow's journey into this space that seems to gradually swallow the explorer and eventually expose him to its unbearable horror, using the biblical key. Marlow's gradual descent into the heart of darkness strikingly and purposefully parallels Dante's similar endeavor into the nine circles of the

Inferno:

> …it seemed to me that I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno (Conrad 24).

Dante's devils or maybe sinners are replaced in Conrad's narrative with indigenous people, reduced to their animality, whether this is disease, lust or greed, but not stripped of their bare humanity:

> Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced with the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair. (Conrad 24)

Undoubtedly, Conrad's chronotope, which emerges as the "center for concretizing representation, a force giving body to the entire novel" (Bakhtin 250) is intentionally modelled after culturally relevant representations of the Christian Inferno, in order to reflect the protagonist's physical and psychological regression into "the heart of darkness", the primordial chaos, the *illo tempore* of mankind:

> Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. (Conrad 11)

However, Conrad's criticism is not directed towards Africa's lack of response to the European abuse, its primitiveness or its defeat, but rather towards its abusers whose eloquent deceit stems from a place of power and control. Kurtz's discourse is fascinating, compelling, yet misleading. Like Satan's, his words cast a net of alluring deceit to justify capital sins. The horror that Marlow experiences actually emerges from seeing the effects of colonial exploitation and of human greed rather than experiencing the unknown.

Difference as insurmountable opposition lies at the core of Conrad's construction of a space that is perceived as threatening, dark and evil simply because it is lacks solid cartographic references that would allow readers to comfortably identify it. The unknown, which at its core is similar to death in the way people relate to it, becomes the underlying reason for which Conrad's Africa is depicted as it is. The fear of the unknown is here appeased through an abundant infernal imaginary which ends up metaphorically rendering the horrors of human nature rather than those of the dark continent. For these reasons, it is my contention that Conrad's novella should be read in the key that Harold Bloom suggests at the end of his introduction to Bloom's Guides to *Heart of Darkness,* as a mythological narrative despite its involuntary obscurantism (Bloom 4). Or rather, precisely because of it. The power of myth that Bloom invokes refers to both Conrad's ability to maintain the fascination for the unfamiliar and the remote, as well as to the strikingly universal quality of Marlow's journey. We all are, at one point or another, exploring our own heart of darkness and the experience is, despite the ensuing terror,

profoundly relatable.

Gurnah's *Paradise*. Heaven(s) on Earth

Abdulrazak Gurnah's 1994 *Paradise* seems to retrace Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness, but from within outwards. Set in pre-WW1 Eastern Africa, the novel follows twelve-year-old Yusuf in a self-discovery journey across the continent, while the spectre of colonialism looms in the horizon. The protagonist's transition from innocence to experience, from childhood to adulthood is wonderfully accompanied by a myriad of stories that he hears on the way from Swahili storytellers that Gurnah gives voice and agency to, almost as a redeeming response to Kurtz's malevolent eloquence.

Strikingly dissimilar to Conrad's promiscuous space, Gurnah's Africa is heterogenous, plural, diverse, thriving on diversity and blooming at the intersection of Arab, Indian and European influences. Refusing the Eurocentric stereotypical representation, Tanzanian-born Gurnah tells the story of Africa as an insider, while allowing agency and a voice to the various cultures that have contributed to the production of a multi-layered space. As the twelve-year-old Yusuf is sent to live and travel with "Uncle" Aziz, a rich Arab merchant, he discovers both the horrors and the wonders of a cosmopolitan environment where rich and diverse cultural influences intertwine and merge.

One of Gurnah's merits is that he sets out to debunk the myth of Africa as the dark continent which only became relevant due to European colonization. Yusuf's journey follows the ancient trade routes between East Africa, Asia and the Arab Peninsula, exposing the inconsistencies of previous Eurocentric misbeliefs. As the novel's protagonist, Yusuf epitomizes the ongoing search for meaning and a sense of self in a constantly shifting reality. Sold to Aziz by his parents, in exchange for an older debt, Yusuf starts out from a very marginal position: as a child, an orphan and a slave. Gradually, his journey uncovers various layers of marginality and centrality which would qualify as what Pia Brînzeu defines as the *chronotope of postcolonialism*:

> Postcolonialism, with its insistence on marginal nations, has developed its own chronotope, based on the fact that nations tell themselves in making connections between indicators of space (often arbitrary borders) and inidcators of time (stories, events, episodes, moments), while restricting the space-time relationship to the more limited *place-past* relationship. (Brînzeu in Vukanovic & Lovorka 144)

Unlike Conrad's well coagulated Inferno that was a collage of classical mythology and Christian eschatology, Gurnah's Paradise is diverse and plural. Yusuf's transition through various places whose substance oscillates between harsh desert and lush green oases metaphorically signifies the fragile nature of his own, personal paradise. As a child on the 3k of adolescence, Yusuf is in a state of transition that parallels that of the

landscape he crosses, as well as of the times he lives through. His wellbeing as well as that of the space he moves through depend on external forces that are far beyond the control of such a young creature. Abundance and violence coexist in this space where Western cultural references are quickly rendered inoperable.

Throughout the novel, Gurnah provides various glimpses into his protagonists' very diverse paradises, refusing to provide centrality to any of them To Yusuf, paradise is already lost from the beginning of the novel, as he is forced to abandon his family and childhood and set out into the unknown, in a long process of self-discovery and recovery. For Hamid, the shopkeeper who takes Yusuf as an apprentice while uncle Aziz is away,

> Paradise is the seventh level, itself divided into seven levels. The highest is the Jennet al Adn, the Garden of Eden. They don't allow hairy blasphemers in there, even if they can roar like a thousand wild lions. (Gurnah 86)

For Maimuna, Hamid's wife, paradise is only accessible to the others, as she and her family have to survive on scarce resources, while for Abdalla, the harsh and terrifying crew leader, "if there is paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here" (Gurnah 112). The heterogeneity of all these versions of paradise endorses Pia Brînzeu's commentary on postcolonial narrative according to which "place experiences have been necessarily time-deepened and memory-qualified, and space has been transformed into a more specific place, with its own history" (Brînzeu in Vukanovic & Lovorka 145). Eventually, Paradise is individually defined by the protagonists, as mental constructs, subverting thus any theocratic construction of sacred spaces that rests on stereotype, cultural hegemony or Eurocentric master narratives. As such, Gurnah's paradises fall apart one by one in front of the evils of human nature: greed, lust, exploitation. Conrad's Kurtz is echoed by the Germans who populate Gurnah's novel as agents of terror and disruption:

> The Germans were afraid of nothing. They did whatever they wanted and no one could stop them. One of the boys said that his father had seen a German put his hand in the heart of a blazing fire without being burnt, as if he were a ghost. (Gurnah 78)

In many ways, Gurnah's novel is a revisiting of Achebe's 1958 *Things Fall Apart,* as well as a response of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* The intertextual connection is undeniable, as there are numerous cross-references that are made visible by the way in which Gurnah chooses to frame his narrative, construct his space and shape his characters. His Africa resides on difference as diversity rather than threat, still it remains vulnerable to external pressure and the spectre of colonialism.

Conclusions

The present study has been fueled by a relatively simple observation related to the

universality of human nature, its fears and anxieties. Beyond the incredibly intricate web of narratives, stories, histories and topographies lie some undeniable, immutable realities that all humans experience. Life and death constitute the two pillars that human existence is eventually defined by, like anything else in the natural world. Unable or unwilling to contemplate their immanence, which psychiatrist Irvin Yalom compares to staring at the sun, mankind has conceived of intricate layers of deceit that would obscure the inevitability of mortality. Thus, cultures arose, complicate systems of beliefs and narratives meant not only to explain the world around, but also to provide a user's manual of how to cope with it. Within these complex systems, eschatological narratives became particularly meaningful, as their role was to efficiently manage people's inescapable fear of death. Paradise and Hell became the two polarized expressions of mankind's hope for immortality.

Portraying Africa as either an inferno or as paradise is certainly culture-dependent, as well as strongly political. The choice of Conrad's canonical text coupled with Gurnah's contemporary response to it has revealed the transition of Western culture from a theocratic paradigm governed by an almighty invisible entity to liberal humanism. Also, it has illustrated the reconfiguration of the concept of difference from classical binary opposition to contemporary plural diversity. The infernal Africa of *either/or* that Conrad imagines as the reservoir of all Eurocentric fears of the unknown has been turned into Gurnah's plural Africa of *both/and,* where paradise is at most a very personal human construct strictly dependent on individual identity and experience.

To conclude, the narrative construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of a particular place turns out to be part of a geography of the mind, strongly connected to the cultural background and the intentions of the author and text, rather than a mere depiction of a space. Paradise and Hell can therefore coexist along the same coordinates, depending on who is telling the story, when and why they are telling it and, ultimately, on who is reading it.

Disclosure statement

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