

# Racism and Discourse: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Maggie Gee's *The White Family*

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## Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* deals with the relationship between the white race and black race in the colonial period. The novel shows how the blacks are dominated by the whites who regard themselves as the superior race. Maggie Gee's *The White Family*, on the other hand, is a post-colonial novel showing that although non-whites have acquired some socio-economic rights pertaining to education, private ownership and working, they are still exposed to racism. The novel underlines the fact that the blacks in the post-colonial society, like their predecessors, are regarded as inferior to the white race in terms of intellect, morals and social manners. Moreover, *The White Family* reveals how black people are made to feel themselves as foreigners. Although non-whites have English names and speak English in Gee's novel, they, like their counterparts in *Heart of Darkness*, are stigmatised as 'the other' due to their darker skins. The aim of this study is to show that Western racist discourse causes black people to suffer from racial discrimination both in colonial and post-colonial periods by making a comparative study of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Gee's *The White Family*.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad, Maggie Gee, *Heart of Darkness*, *The White Family*, racial discrimination.

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## İrkçılık ve Söylem: Joseph Conrad'ın *Karanlığın Yüreği* ve Maggie Gee'nin *White Ailesi*

### Öz

Joseph Conrad'ın *Karanlığın Yüreği*, kolonyal dönemdeki beyaz ırk ve siyah ırk arasındaki ilişkiyi konu alır. Roman, kendilerini üstün ırk olarak gören beyazların siyahlara hükmedişlerini gösterir. Maggie Gee'nin *White Ailesi* adlı eseri ise, beyaz olmayanların eğitim, özel mülkiyet ve çalışmaya ilişkin bazı sosyo-ekonomik haklar elde etmelerine rağmen, yine de ırkçılığa maruz kaldıklarını gösteren post-kolonyal bir romandır. Roman, sömürge sonrası toplumdaki siyahların, kendilerinden öncekiler gibi, akıl, ahlak ve sosyal davranış açısından beyaz ırktan aşağı görüldüklerinin altını çizer. Ayrıca, *White Ailesi*, siyahların kendilerini nasıl yabancı hissettirildiklerini ortaya koyar. Gee'nin romanında beyaz ırktan olmayanların isimleri İngilizce olmasına ve İngilizce konuşmalarına rağmen, *Karanlığın Yüreği*'ndeki soydaşları gibi, koyu tenleri nedeniyle 'öteki' olarak yaftalanırlar. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Joseph Conrad'ın *Karanlığın Yüreği* ve Maggie Gee'nin *White Ailesi* adlı eserleri üzerine karşılaştırmalı bir çalışma yaparak Batılı ırkçı söylemin siyahların hem sömürge hem de sömürge sonrası dönemlerde ırk ayrımcılığına maruz kalmasına neden olduğunu göstermektir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Joseph Conrad, Maggie Gee, *Karanlığın Yüreği*, *White Ailesi*, ırksal ayrımcılık.

## Racism and Discourse: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Maggie Gee's *The White Family*

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a novel that shows the master-slave relation between the whites and blacks in the colonial period. In the novel, the whites dominate the blacks whom they consider as inferior creatures that are ignorant and uncultivated. The whites do not only despise the blacks, their language, or native rites but they also control their lands and natural and material sources through violence or a racist discourse underlying the superiority of the white race. Maggie Gee's *The White Family*, on the other hand, is a post-colonial novel that shows that although the minority groups coming from the ex-colonies to Britain have acquired some rights to receive education, to work, to hold personal property and to preserve their native culture, still they are exposed to racist attitudes. The novel also shows the problems of the minorities who try to adapt themselves to the host culture. The aim of the present study is to show that Western racist discourse causes black people to suffer from racial discrimination both in colonial and post-colonial periods by making a comparative study of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Gee's *The White Family*.

*Heart of Darkness* is a novel which is mainly about the journey of Marlow, one of the narrators in the novel, to the Congo River. He describes the journey as a trip to heart of darkness as he witnesses just brutality, savagery and primitiveness in Africa. The novel also shows how Kurtz, a European man respected as an intelligent man, turns into a person who has lost his mental balance and his civil manners. The story of *The White Family*,

on the other hand, revolves largely around the members of the White family. Alfred White is the head of the family and he is a park keeper in a London park, and he is known for his hostility towards the immigrants. His wife May is a housewife who is interested in English language and literature and she, unlike her husband, is more tolerant towards the minorities. Their daughters Shirley is a rich widow of an African man called Kojo and she is despised by her father and her racist brother Dirk for having black boyfriends. Daren White, on the other hand, is the elder son of the Whites who works as a journalist in America. The main climax in the novel occurs towards the end of the novel when Dirk kills Shirley's black lover's brother Winston out of racial hatred. This tragic event shows the extent of prejudice and dislike towards the blacks. In the end, Alfred, whose sense of duty outweighs his fatherly feelings, informs against his son in spite of his wife's protests and Shirley gives birth to two sons, one of whom is named Winston.

Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the term culture was associated with "the improvement of the individual human mind and personal manners through learning" (Smith, 2001, p. 1). In these centuries, culture not only meant personal cultivation, but also social cultivation and it was related to civilization (Smith, 2001). During this period, the "civilised" Europe was considered to be superior to other countries that lacked a cultivated technology, "morals and manners" (Smith, 2001, p. 1). This racist discourse, in turn, prevents the formation of a truly multicultural society/nation, where cultural differences are tolerated and regarded as an opportunity to have an "ethnocultural diversity" (Kymlicka, 2010, p. 33). The antagonism between the white and the darker races, on the other hand, is

mainly caused by the stereotypical images of the non-white races drawn by the early European explorers (Lott, 2010). The general image created by their descriptions led the white to despise the opposite race as creatures that are “phlegmatic, relaxed, indolent, negligent ... and governed by caprice” (The American Anthropological Association, as cited in Lott, 2010, p. 19). Black people were described as “loathsome, disturbing, filthy, uncouth, unkempt, grotesque, marauding or diabolical” (Wells, 2010, p. 27). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries racist discourse paved the way to colonisation and the English rulers sought the ways to expand their imperial boundaries by manipulating the racial discourse that enforces white supremacy (Said, 1994, p. 10). The English used the notion of ‘nationalism’ in theological sense so as to defend the idea that some nations are superior to the others: the English justified their colonial politics by assuming that God gave the Anglo-Saxons the right to rule the other nations (Smith, 2001, p. 5). *Heart of Darkness* shows how the blacks are maltreated and exploited for the benefit of the white Europeans. Marlow, who is sent to work in a colonial company in Africa, sees black men who are chained and forced to work for the white masters. The whites try to justify the manipulation of the labour force of the natives by claiming that they are criminals who should be punished. Not only the so-called criminals, but also black labourers working in mines are also exploited as they cannot receive money or proper food in exchange for their labour power:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning  
against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out,  
half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain,  
abandonment, and despair. Another mine ...

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies ... nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation ... Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient ... (Conrad, 2010, p. 23).

Marlow also adds that “[these] dusty niggers with splay feet” are obliged to produce “manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads ... [and] ivory” (Conrad, 2010, p. 25). As such, Western people adopting the racist discourse that enforces white supremacy force the blacks to work under harsh conditions.

Although the blacks, who do not have any access to education or social rights, are forced to work under inhumane conditions in *Heart of Darkness*, in Gee’s *The White Family* the minority groups immigrating to Britain work in better positions under better conditions and this is mainly due to the fact that they have a right to receive education. In London there is a school which welcomes both white students and black students (Gee, 2002, p. 379). The minorities also have a chance to receive a university education. Kojo, an African man, who is the late husband of Shirley, was “highly educated” since he had “his D Phil” (Gee, 2002, p. 131). Thanks to his education, he was able to become a lecturer in comparative literature (Gee, 2002, p. 131). Shirley’s Jamaican lover Elroy is also educated, and he works as an officer in a London hospital. However, the less educated blacks have a less chance to get a good job: they work as a “postmaster” (Gee, 2002, p. 139), as a bus driver (Gee, 2002, p. 29) or as a shoe repairer (Gee, 2002, p. 118).

Ownership is an issue discussed both in Conrad's and Gee's novels. In the former, the natives do not have any right to possess anything in their own country. It is the whites who have the whole wealth of Africa. When Marlow meets the members of the Company who are just interested in money-making through ivory trade, he contemplates that the whites are "conquerors" and their conquest "means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" (Conrad, 2010, p. 10). He underlines the fact that as white men consider themselves superior to the blacks, they feel the right to own their natural and material sources. Marlow also explains that the blacks do not have even the right to have a candle and it is only the manager of Central Station who is "the only man supposed to have any right to candles" (Conrad, 2010, p. 32). Moreover, he accuses the colonists of "robbery" since they not only steal ivory but also such cultural products of natives as "[n]ative mats" to furnish their houses (Conrad, 2010, p. 32). On the other hand, Mr Kurtz, the manager of the inner station, is the best example showing the extent of colonial greed of the white men. He becomes so obsessed with the ivory trade that his greed for ivory extends and includes everything around him: "You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him. '[M]y ivory, my station, my river, my —' everything belonged to him" (Conrad, 2010, p. 66). As the Europeans own everything belonging to the natives by assuming a racial superiority, the blacks cannot not have any economic freedom.

In *The White Family*, the minorities have the socio-economic right to own properties. Shirley's late husband Kojo had his own money and nearly everything Shirley, his white, European wife, has was bought through his

money (Gee, 2002, pp. 136, 53). Shirley herself admits that as Kojo was “rich,” he “saved [her]” from being a poor daughter of a poor English family (Gee, 2002, pp. 132, 137). Viola, the elder sister of Elroy, has a boutique and earns her own life through the money she gets from the shop (Gee, 2002, p. 366). On the other hand, Mr Patel, a Paki, buys the shop of an English man called George, the person with whom Dirk works. As Dirk is a racist and cannot tolerate the non-white persons, he becomes quite angry when George introduces him to the new owner of the shop. Then he refers to *Spearhead*, “a monthly magazine which features articles and comment from a British Nationalist perspective” (Spearhead, 2014) and says that “we are losing our birthright” to live in England (Gee, 2002, p. 190). Dirk suggests that the minorities conquer the English land by making a claim for the properties of the English and regards minorities’ right of ownership as a threat to “[t]he future of England” (Gee, 2002, p. 192).

Preservation of cultural identity is another topic of discussion in both novels. In *Heart of Darkness* the natives do not know English except for a few simple English words. A black man of Marlow’s crew wants him to give them the natives attacking the ship as they desire to eat them by using basic English words: “‘Catch ‘im,’ he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—‘catch ‘im. Give ‘im to us.’” (Conrad, 2010, p. 55). The news of death of Kurtz is also delivered with simple English words by a native man: “Mistah Kurtz—he dead” (Conrad, 2010, p. 95). Instead of speaking a proper and elaborated English, the blacks speak in their own native tongue, thus Marlow, an English man, says that they do not speak “an understandable language” (Conrad, 2010, p. 63). According to him they just



speak “weird incantation” and shout “periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language” (Conrad, 2010, pp. 87, 91-92). The Russian tradesman, who is an admirer of Mr Kurtz, also cannot understand the language of natives living near the Inner Station as “the dialect of this tribe” is foreign to him (Conrad, 2010, p. 84). The clothes of natives are also different from the European clothes. In the Inner Station, Marlow sees the natives who are “naked” and who are “with spears in their hands, with bows [and] with shields” (Conrad, 2010, p. 81). Among the natives, Marlow also sees Kurtz’s black mistress who wears “barbarous ornaments” and “bizarre things” (Conrad, 2010, p. 83). Marlow regards Kurtz’s African mistress inferior to his European intended, who wears a Western-style mourning dress. Marlow says that he saw Kurtz’ fiancée “all in black” and adds that her appearance gives the impression that she, unlike the savage mistress of Kurtz, has “a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (Conrad, 2010, p. 101).

Marlow also regards the religious rituals of the natives as bizarre because they are different from Christian rituals which he is familiar with. He hears sounds of drums instead of church bells on the lands of natives: “[I can hear] on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country” (Conrad, 2010, p. 27). He also comes across a black sorcerer conducting a religious ritual when he follows Mr Kurtz who escapes from Marlow’s ship to go into forest at night. This sorcerer is not like a Christian

man of religion as he has “horns—antelope horns ... on its head” and he “look[s] fiendlike” (Conrad, 2010, p. 89).

In Gee’s novel, unlike Conrad’s novel, the minorities try to adapt themselves to the host culture to be able to live with the English in harmony. The immigrants speak English to communicate with natives. Elroy, who has a Jamaican origin, speaks London English, thus he “sound[s] more of a Londoner” than Shirley, an English woman who “never did care enough about English” (Gee, 2002, pp. 167, 165). Although the non-English try to speak plain English, they are still despised by native speakers for not speaking English properly. Shirley’s mother May, an English woman who pays attention to the use of her native language, criticises the fact that the religious pamphlet about black people’s church is written in American English not in pure English (Gee, 2002, p. 165). Dirk also criticises a black bus driver, who claims that the notice saying “Tender exact money please” is written “[i]n plain English” (Gee, 2002, p. 29). He says, “Tender exact money ... that’s not proper English” since “a normal bloke [does not] use a word like ‘tender’” (Gee, 2002, p. 29). Moreover, he adds that the non-English do not have any right to talk about English as it is not their native language: “And he [the bus driver] has the fucking cheek to talk about English. As if they owned it. Our speech. Our language” (Gee, 2002, p. 29). In this way, the novel shows that although the minorities speak English, the natives consider them ‘the other’ as they do not share the common lingual background.

The immigrants in *The White Family* wear both their native clothes and the western style dresses. Therefore, their dressing style is not purely native

or purely English. On London streets it is possible to see a black woman wearing “her orange African head-dress,” “black- hooded Arab women” or “African girls in reds and oranges” (Gee, 2002, pp. 203, 363). However, it is also possible to see “a good-looking [African] family, smartly dressed” or an Asian family in which “the little girls in frilly western party frocks” (Gee, 2002, pp. 12, 72). Although the Asian family is dressed in western style, Alfred, who has a strict adherence to the sense of Englishness, cannot bear to see the non-English family and complains that England has too many immigrants (Gee, 2002, p. 72).

Unlike the Africans in Conrad’s novel whose religious rituals are conducted by a sorcerer in the open air, the members of minority groups in *The White Family* merge Christian rituals with their own cultural customs. Elroy is a strict biblical follower, but he does not prefer to go to English church, where “nearly all of [followers] are white,” but to the church of black people where “the majority is black” (Gee, 2002, pp. 358, 365). In terms of rules and religious services, black churches are more flexible. English churches are “much quieter” since the believers are supposed to deliver “silent prayer[s]” (Gee, 2002, pp. 354, 358). However, in black people’s church “at least half the congregation [are] dancing” and prayers are accompanied by “music” and “singing” (Gee, 2002, p. 367). The fact that the blacks go to their own churches and subvert the conventional Christian services can be read as an attempt to set an alternative for the churches of white Christians who are prejudiced against them and who try to impose their religious ideology on non-Christians.

Unlike the natives in *Heart of Darkness* who have preserved their own cultural and ethnic identities to a great extent, some non-English characters in Gee's novel have nearly lost their ethnic and cultural identities in the process of westernisation, a term which "refers to the influence of Western ideas, values and practices on the non-Western world" (Thong, 2012, p. 894). Kojo was a well-educated African man who lived in London and worked as an academic in a British university. He had adopted western values and led a western life. He was "a Marxist and a Christian" (Gee, 2002, p. 129). He did not "believe in spirits" since he thought that was "ridiculous" and said that "[he] left all that nonsense behind in Ghana" (Gee, 2002, p. 129). He also married Shirley, an English woman, and settled down in England instead of going back to his motherland (Gee, 2002, p. 132). He also used to prefer to go to St. John's, where the majority is white, because he could not bear to hear "the shouting and jerking" in the black churches (Gee, 2002, p. 354). He was also liked and well-known by white people in the church (Gee, 2002, p. 354). Even Dirk, a racist, liked Kojo as "[he] was different" and "[he] wasn't like the others" (Gee, 2002, p. 76). Since Kojo "was westernised" by adopting the values of white people, Dirk did not regard Kojo as a black man (Gee, 2002, pp. 129, 76).

African immigrants adopting western values are no longer pure African or pure English. Elroy has a hybrid<sup>1</sup> identity because he is a Jamaican, but he has an English name "Elroy" which means "[t]he king" (Truman & Bradley, 2005, p. 272). Shirley says that as a West-Indian, Elroy resents the fact

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<sup>1</sup> In cultural studies, hybridity means "the mixing together of previously discrete cultural elements to create new meanings and identities" (Barker, 2004, p. 89).

that West Indians do not have their own names, thus their own identities, because “West Indian names are all slave names” which were imposed by slave owners (Gee, 2002, p. 130). Moreover, Elroy was born in Peckham, a district in South-East London, he speaks English, lives and works in England, but he is not considered as an English man by Alfred as he does not have pure English blood (Gee, 2002, p. 62). Shirley, on the other hand, calls Elroy as “British<sup>2</sup>” (Gee, 2002, p. 62) because he is a citizen of the United Kingdom though he is a second-generation immigrant<sup>3</sup>. However, her father does not even consider him as a British man and despises Elroy, saying that he is “as British as bananas” (Gee, 2002, p. 62). He thinks that Elroy does not have a right to live in England permanently or to be a British subject because he has the migrant ideology which claims that the African-Caribbeans are “transient workers who would return to their countries of origin once they had accumulated sufficient money” (Cashmore, 1994, p. 23). Elroy’s younger brother Winston<sup>4</sup> also has a hybrid identity as he has an English name, and he goes to an English university but still he is not regarded as an English man as he is not a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP). Like his brother, he is considered “a foreigner” (Gee, 2002, p. 161) because he is “[a] black man” who “look[s] exotic, and faintly out of place” (Gee, 2002, pp. 142, 162). However, Winston rejects being regarded as a foreigner or ‘the other’ so he

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<sup>2</sup> The term British refers to a multicultural and multi-national society comprised of people living in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland (Hornby, 2004, p. 148).

<sup>3</sup> Second-generation immigrants are minorities who are regarded as foreigners although they were “born in Britain and educated in British schools” (Braham, 2003, p. 300).

<sup>4</sup> Winston is “[t]ransferred use of the surname originating from the Old English elements wine (friend) and tūn (town, settlement, village, enclosure): hence, ‘friendly town’” (Norman, 2003, p. 118).

protests May, who calls him a foreigner: “I am not a foreigner ... [My name is] Winston ... That’s not a foreigner’s name, is it?” (Gee, 2002, p. 161).

Although non-English people in *The White Family* have opportunities to receive education, to own their personal properties or to perform their own religious rituals freely, they are hardly different from the black people in *Heart of Darkness* because both groups are othered and humiliated by white people who regard the blacks as “phlegmatic, relaxed, indolent, negligent ... and governed by caprice” (The American Anthropological Association qtd. in Lott, 2010, p. 19). In Conrad’s novel, the natives are called “savages” (Conrad, 2010, p. 26), “brute[s]” (Conrad, 2010, p. 34), “prehistoric” (Conrad, 2010, p. 49), “simple” (Conrad, 2010, p. 72) and “fool” people “[having] no restraint” (Conrad, 2010, p. 69). Therefore, the white Europeans who regard themselves as representatives of “science and progress” (Conrad, 2010, p. 34) claim that they have “a heavenly mission to civilize [black people]” (Conrad, 2010, p. 11) and it is their duty to “[wean] those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” (Conrad, 2010, p. 17).

*The White Family* also shows that the blacks are exposed to racial discrimination. Alfred regards the blacks as “threatening” and ignorant people who cannot even read the signs in the park (Gee, 2002, pp. 10, 12). As he “hate[s] black people,” he warns Shirley to “watch out for [herself]” when she is with Kojo (Gee, 2002, pp. 130, 40). He does not like Elroy, either as he is also a black man. Dirk, on the other hand, is more racist than his father as he not only humiliates the blacks by calling them “darkies” (Gee, 2002, p. 306) or

“[f]ucking coloureds<sup>5</sup>” (Gee, 2002, p. 44) but he also dreams about “crush[ing] [the blacks] like flies” (Gee, 2002, p. 186) and killing the non-whites (Gee, 2002, p. 190) whom he regards as “animals” (Gee 304) because he thinks that the blacks are “violent people” (Gee, 2002, p. 186) and they invade England. Dirk fulfils his dream about the blacks by killing Winston out of racial hatred (Gee, 2002, p. 345). Considering the racist outlook of the whites about the blacks, it is understood that granting socio-economic rights to the racial minorities is not enough for equal citizenship, but it is also necessary to eliminate the racist discourse of white men who consider themselves as the members of the superior race.

To summarise, *The White Family* shows that the position of non-whites as the inferior has not changed since Conrad’s time. Although it is a post-colonial novel written after the dissolution of British Empire, it points to the fact that racial discrimination continues to be practised against the non-whites. In the novel, it is underlined that people coming from ex-colonies have some social rights that were not granted to the slaves in Conrad’s novel set in the colonial period, such as private ownership, receiving education and the right to work and earn money. However, it is also expressed that as the English adopt the racist discourse based on the superiority of the white race, the Africans and the other racial minorities are treated as inferior creatures that are considered to be savage, ignorant and violent. Moreover, *The White Family* shows that the minorities are generally made to feel themselves as a foreigner in the post-colonial period. Although they have English names and

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<sup>5</sup> Coloured is a term “used in the UK and the USA to distinguish those with dark skin from those who are defined ... as ‘white’” (Valeri, 2003, p. 41).

speak English, they are stigmatised as ‘the other’ due to their darker skins. Therefore, it is argued that racist discourse, rather than skin colour, is responsible for the discrimination between the whites and the blacks.

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