BLACK BRAIN, WHITE BRAIN

In Desert and Wilderness by Henryk Sienkiewicz in the Light of Postcolonial Studies

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Abstract. In spite of the fact that Poland has never had colonial territories in Africa, the novel *In Desert and Wilderness* written by Henryk Sienkiewicz in 1912 became one of the classics of Polish literature. It not only received a status of mandatory reading at primary schools all over Poland, but it also gained popularity among readers from all over the world. No doubt, Sienkiewicz's work strongly contributed to the formation of an image of Africa in the minds of Polish children and adults. Therefore, disclosing and presenting the frame assumptions, the discourse of the novel seems of major importance and is the purpose of this paper. The stranger is a primary notion to decode and understand the fictional world Sienkiewicz is narrating. The construction of fictional reality, characters, and plot appears to provide several new meanings when analysed from the point of view of postcolonial theory, with references to concepts of Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Ch. Spivak. The ways of presentation of three main groups of characters: Arabs and Bedouins, black people, and white people, will be analysed. The discourse of the novel hides several presumptions as far as ethnic identity of each of these groups is concerned. The whole structure of relations with other ethnic groups is encoded into the fictional story, as well as the appropriate attitude a young Pole should adopt in his adult life, since *In Desert and Wilderness* seems to be an example of *Bildungsroman*.[1]

Keywords: novel, Sienkiewicz, Africa, postcolonial theory, colonialism.

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An oeuvre of probably the most translated Polish writer ever in the history, a Noble prize winner, became an object of several various and contradictory interpretations. The apparently quite simple and traditional adventure story describing a trip of a couple of children through far and exotic (for European readers) African lands seems to keep some disquieting secret inside. Its proponents and enthusiasts praise the swift action with suspense, the vivid characters exampling the most important virtues such as courage, sacrifice, loyalty, chivalry, thoughtfulness, ingenuity. Krzysztof Rutkowski names the story of Staś i Nel "a most successful version of a parable on the victory of good over evil" (Rutkowski, after Axer and Bujnicki 2012, 627–628). Still, even they describe *In Desert and Wilderness* as racist and sexist, representing, the so called, "colonial idea" (Axer and Bujnicki 2012, 610–615).

One of the first reviewers of its English translation already in 1912 points out "an occasional coarseness of expression, which is much less glaring than in the prince of dramatists [i.e. Shakespeare], and is more offensive in translations than in the original" (M.K. 1912, 523). A contemporary Israeli researcher, Rachel Weissbrod, describes the novel as "openly racist" (Weissbrod 2008, 171), while a Sudan scholar, Mahmud el Tayeb calls it "deceitful" (el Tayeb 2012, 571).

The following analysis is inspired by post-colonial theory, a huge and complicated current in contemporary theory of literary discourse. One of its pioneers, Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism – Western Conceptions of the Orient* (2003), published in 1978, poses a question about the archaeology, in Foucaultian sense, of contemporary academic oriental studies. Said proves that in the discourse of academic discipline of Orientalism there are hidden a lot of social, political, anthropological, and philosophical presumptions. In fact, according to him, in the practice of oriental studies scientific research is inseparable from social, political, and military activity. It definitely is not a "pure science", since it has been created as a way of political legitimization of military conquest of the East by the West.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak develops some elements of Said's approach, concentrating especially on the figure of Orientals she calls "subalterns", using this term after Antonio Gramsci (Spivak 1988, 283). She underlines the fact that subalterns are deprived of their own way of expression. They are always represented and never representing themselves. She investigates the idea on an example of Western critiques of suicides of Hindu widows, when "White men are saving brown woman from brown men" (Spivak 1988, 296). Lack of voice of the

indigenous people and paternalistic attitude toward them is also typical for Sienkiewicz's narrative, as we shall see.

The novel has already been subjected to several analyses from the aspect of post-colonial theory by such researchers as Anna Kłobucka (2001), Anna Cichoń (2004), Jan Kieniewicz (2012), Ewa Kosowska (2012), Mahmud el Tayeb (2012) and several others. However, there is no agreement, as far as the final interpretation is concerned. In the following part of the paper some quotations from the novel will be taken into consideration, regarding fundamental assumptions of the narrator's view of the world. First of all, I will try to characterize the main features of narration of the novel, then I get deeper into the fictional world presented in it. I will be interested above all in fictional characters and the ways they are depicted.

Narration

The perspective of a narrator of the novel could be classified as *personale Erzählsituation* with several elements of *auktoriale Erzählsituation*, referring to Franz F. Stanzel's nomenclature (1964). The personal narrator functions as a "mirror" reflecting the state of mind of a character. The auctorial narrator possesses more substantiality than the personal narrator and more knowledge then fictional characters. The storyteller of *In Desert and Wilderness* ostentatiously demonstrates his superiority over a reader as far as the knowledge about Africa's reality is concerned. The narrator uses words in Arabic and other languages of Africa, when describing specific, local entities: social roles, objects, forms of landscape etc.[2]

However, most of the time, the point of view of the narration is situated in the head of the main hero of the novel, 14-years old Staś, who is a white boy born in Africa, from a French mother and a Polish father. Thus, what we see is Africa through the eyes of a young, white male. For some of interpreters this is the reason, why the problem of colonialism in the context of the novel appears at all (Kieniewicz 2012, 353). For others, this way of construction of the novel can be perceived as a carrier of colonial ideology (Cichoń 2004, 93).

Arabs and Bedouins

Figures of Arabs and Bedouins that appear on the pages of the novel seem to have very simple, one-sided, biased psychological construction. They are always wild, aggressive, primitive and loud. "Gebhr always had a cruel and a trifle bestial expression of face" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 40). Mahdi's soldiers fighting against

[2] For instance: "khanage" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 44), "kelb kebir"(Sienkiewicz 1917, 72), "khor" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 76), etc.

English troops for independence of Sudan are called "the wild hordes (…) barbarians" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 14), "the savage hordes intoxicated with blood" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 125). These kinds of terms belong to a category of asymmetric counter-concepts, such as Hellenes vs. Barbarians, Christians vs. Heathens, or *Mensch* vs. *Übermensch*. They are created and operated by a group that "makes an exclusive claim to generality, applying a linguistically universal concept to itself alone and rejecting all comparison" (Koselleck 2004, 156).

One of side observations of the narrator is that "in Egypt Arabs as well as Bedouins yell on every occasion as if they are about to annihilate each other" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 96). They resemble animals (Gebhr's "bestial expression of face") and are closer to them than white people what is confirmed by their nutritional customs: they consume raw meat. At the end of the day, Bedouins "swallowing a few strips of raw meat, flung themselves, like logs, on the saddle-cloth" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 165). They are dirty and live in a very unhygienic way, therefore they are often sick: "as every Arabian child sucks sugar-cane from morning to night, the children always attract after them legions of flies, which besides being loathsome are noxious, for they spread the Egyptian infection of inflammation of the eyes" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 39). An association of a whole ethnic group ("every Arabian child") with a severe disease is delineated.

Next to their wild, primitive, animal, and even unhealthy nature, they represent several moral defects. They, Orientals, are masters of lying: "she lies as only in the East they know how to lie" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 21). Money belongs to their weak points: "he knew that (…) much the people in the East are greedy and venal" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 66). They seem to arouse respect rather than sympathy: "he was, like almost every Arab, covetous and ambitious" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 140). Contrary to the black people, Arabs represent strength capable to threaten the whites. This strength is related to their Muslim religion, which, according to the best knowledge of the narrator, can turn even a humble person into a cruel religious warrior: "negroes, until Mohammedanism fills their souls with cruelties and hatred against infidels, are rather timid and gentle" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 369). As one of the researchers writes: "Sienkiewicz is visibly afraid of Islamists, whereas, with respect to the black people, he sees in them potential Catholics" (Cichoń, 2004, 103).

But even the value of Arabs' and Bedouins' religiosity is undermined, since they seem to be polytheist. A Bedouin "prostrate himself to the approaching whirlwind", what is interpreted by the narrator as a clear proof of idolatry: "His faith in one God evidently did not prevent his worship and fear of others for Staś distinctly heard him say: 'Lord! We are thy children; therefore do not devour us'" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 369). This quote exemplifies and in the same time discloses a

strategy the teller of the story is undertaking. To prostrate against a strong wind may happen even to non-religious person. It is nothing surprising that a devout Muslim calls "Lord" when being in danger. It looks like the narrator would have an intention to discredit the religiosity of Muslims. He is interpreting their behaviour according to his preconceptions, even though it may be visible for a reader that his interpretation could be easily undermined.

A difference between Whites on the one hand, and Arabs and Bedouins on the other, is formulated in a discourse of anatomy and concerns the base of intellectual capabilities. "He not only has a dark skin but also a dark brain" – Staś uses this statement as an argument in a discussion to discredit Chamis' words – with expected, positive effect (Sienkiewicz 1917, 65).

Black people

Quite similarly to Arabs and Bedouins, black people are wild, lickerish, close to animals. "Dinah (...) was known for her uncommon gluttony" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 30). Kali's first reaction to a trapped elephant: "The elephant cannot get out. Great master kill the elephant and Kali will eat him. Oh, eat, eat!" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 246). White children restrain desires of a black boy and the elephant, a symbol of the African nature, survives. A white man saves a powerful animal from the hands and stomachs of indigenous people. In the following part of the story, Staś profits from the elephant to defeat native villages and persuade them to supply food and soldiers. In this way Africa got conquered with its own weapon.

Another example of gluttony: "Nasibu (…) at once took advantage of the gifts brought for Nell so conscientiously that after an hour his little abdomen resembled an African war drum" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 246). Nasibu is a little child, even in the company of eight years old Nell described as being in "childish age" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 246). "Nasibu looked like a melon walking on thin legs," (Sienkiewicz 1917, 339). A big belly of an African child is associated with gluttony rather than with sickness caused by malnutrition. Moreover, by a subtle metaphorization, a full belly of an African leads to a semantic field of war. An analogy may come to mind, one of a popular rules of thumb among of political dictators that hungry people do not revolt, and that it's a full stomach that may bring about aggressive behaviour.

A reader of *In Desert and Wilderness* can easily remark a specific feature of Kali's speaking: he speaks in "barbarian English" ("Great master kill the elephant"). In original Polish version Kali doesn't conjugate verbs, what makes his statements clearly different from "civilized language". His language is a Polish version of "le Petit nègre", simplified French language used by inhabitants of African territories occupied by France. Even granting that this may seem quite

surprising, somehow contrarily to a reader's expectation, Kali and Staś doesn't speak English, nor French. Definitely not Polish. Their only common language is Kiswahili. Staś had learned Kiswahili from "the natives from Zanzibar" in Port Said, where he was born and grew up. The conclusion is that Staś speaks better Kiswahili than Kali (Sieniewicz 2012, 355).

The only domain native Africans are superior over whites is physical fitness. "Arabs and negroes [sic] swim like fishes [sic]" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 9). Mea, Nell's servant, "climbed the rope with skill and agility as if she were the full sister of a chimpanzee. For Staś it was considerably more difficult, but he was too well-trained an athlete" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 229). In case of Mea, a black girl, a good physical ability is a sign of a regress to animality ("the full sister of a chimpanzee"). Meanwhile Staś who also happens to represent some physical fitness, even though not such impressive as Mea, it is appraised in terms of sophisticated culture (a trained athlete).

Black people are cruel. During a battle among natives: "Nobody begged for mercy, for mercy is unknown to negroes [sic]." (Sienkiewicz 1917, 391). Paradoxically enough they are not best examples of courage. "Kali (…) begged him not to leave him alone," (Sienkiewicz 1917, 378) – Kali, a native African, is afraid to stay alone in ravine in his mother continent and needs Staś' protection.

In general, native Africans don't seem autonomous and self-reliant in the world presented in the novel. An adult African woman is not wise and responsible enough to take care of children during the trip and a fourteen years old white boy must take command. "Dinah (...) was not able to take care of herself on the railways and in the hotels, the duties of guide and paymaster during this trip devolved upon Staś" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 25). They are irresponsible from their nature, the narrator mentions "inbred negro carelessness" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 421). They are lazy and white men must supply food to them: "During the stop the white men were occupied with hunting and arranging their geographical and scientific notes, and the negroes devoted themselves to idleness, which is always so sweet to them" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 434).

An oppressive topos of a black person as a child in a need of patronage of white men is present on cards of the novel in the whole extent. "Among the blacks there are honest souls, though as a rule you cannot depend upon their gratitude; they are children who forget what happened the day before" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 316). Black people are not grateful, still, they shouldn't be blamed too much, since they are as children, therefore they don't constitute a full-fledged moral subject.

The difference between black and white men is described in a language of anatomy, but the biggest difference is not skin colour, but brain colour — pretty

similarly as with Semitic people (above): "Mea has a dark skin and dark brain" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 258). Here again we confront the Koselleckian notion of asymmetric counterconcepts. White brain becomes an object of admiration and desire of a person equipped with a dark brain. What reinforces rhetorical force of this assertion is that it was uttered by Kali, a black person himself. Only later he hears from Staś' mouth: "The Wahimas have black brains, but your brains ought to be white" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 395). Kali is going make a human sacrifice of his slaves, Staś prohibits it. We come back here to traditional pattern of Christian fight against bloody human sacrifices and the myth of cannibalism, since Wahimas have some "national traditions" related to anthropophagy (Sienkiewicz 1917, 334). This is in the name of Christianity ("Are you not a Christian?") that Staś imposes on Kali an obligation to "enlighten" his tribe. "They are like jackals and like hyenas — make men of them" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 395). Making men would mean to baptize, since this is the easiest way to remove the distinction: human sacrifices and, probably, also cannibalism. These two elements seem to be constitutive for "black brain".

Yet, the essence of "black mind" is best depicted by the following conversation, when Staś, as a modern Socrates, poses a fundamental, ethical question to Kali:

> "Tell me," asked Staś, "what is a wicked deed?"
> "If any one takes away Kali's cow," he answered after a brief reflection, "that then is a wicked deed."
> "Excellent!" exclaimed Staś, "and what is a good one?"
> This time the answer came without any reflection:
> "If Kali takes away the cow of somebody else, that is a good deed." (Sienkiewicz 1917, 334)

This moral attitude gained a special name in Polish language, namely "Kali's morality", "Kali's ethic", or "Kali's law". It sounds like a good joke and it could have probable been one, providing the source of this story, by a quite funny mistake interpreted as a serious moral principle of African people. One must note that "Kali's law" is an exact reversal of "Socrates' law", if we could name with such a brand a principle articulated by Plato's Socrates in "Gorgias":

> POLUS: Then would you wish rather to suffer wrong than to do it?
> SOCRATES: I should wish neither, for my own part; but if it were necessary either to do wrong or to suffer it, I should choose to suffer rather than do it. (Plato 2001, 335)

In his preference to undergo harm rather than to do harm himself, Socrates anticipates Christian ethics. What is captivating, the narrator is not consequent, as far as attribution of "Kali's morality" to black people is concerned, since he adds at once that "similar views of evil and good deeds were enunciated in Europe not only by politicians but by whole nations" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 334). Paradoxically enough, the attitude of the narrator of the story can be easily interpreted as a marvellous example of "Kali's morality". A moment of reflection will do to agree that both "Kali's law" and "Socrates' law" coexist in human life, the former being a part of everyday practice, whereas the latter provides a regulative idea of morality and a basis of fundamental ethical values and norms. Accordingly, black people appear to be deprived of sublime ideas of this kind, and therefore Christianization will allow them to access it.

Indeed, baptism is expected to make a black skin white: "she [Mea] thought that after the baptism her skin would at once turn white, and great was her astonishment when she observed that she remained as black as before" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 335). Thus, the relation between mind and body is bilateral: white skin brings about a white brain and a white (after baptism) brain should cause skin to be white as well. The notion of soul helps. Nell explains to Mea that baptism worked well. Even though the skin of Mea is still black, she possesses a "white soul" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 335). As one of interpreters of the novel states: "White colour is (…) in 'In Desert and Wilderness' a colour is meaningful and evaluative colour" (Cichoń 2004, 102).

Description of the distinction between blacks and whites in terms of brain anatomy has certain tradition in colonial relations. Franz Fanon recalls an opinion of a European psychiatrist denominating "the similarity between the normal African and the lobotomized European" as "striking" (Fanon 2004: 227). Sienkiewicz's Kali can count up to the amount of ten digits: "he could not count above ten and every greater amount appeared to him as 'wengi,' that is, a multitude" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 335).

A psychophysical difference accounts for and justifies the humility black people evince towards whites on every occasion. Some examples: "Entering, she [a Sudanese woman] at once prostrated herself, and when Mr. Rawlinson ordered her to rise, she raised herself but remained on her knees" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 17). As we see the Englishman objects to such a behaviour, but the Sudanese insists. Therefore, as with the label "black brain", the initiative belongs to the black people — all servile compartments are fully spontaneous and voluntary. "Afterwards she again flung herself with face on the ground" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 19).

Kali usually calls Staś a "great master" ("bwana kubwa", Sienkiewicz 1917, 19, 211, 213, 246 etc.). Kali even sings a song devoted to Staś: "The great master kills men and lions. Yah! Yah! The great master crushes rocks. Yah! Yah! The elephant, himself, breaks trees and Kali can be idle and eat. Yah! Yah!" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 324). A Euhemerian concept of a genealogy of myths is in work here: a great, human leader (i.e. Staś) becomes deified by his loyal, grateful subject (Kali). According to the song, Kali has a good reason to praise Staś, since the latter ordered the whole thing in such a way that Kali's life finally got a form he had always desired it to be ("Kali can be idle and eat"[3]).

The greatest wish of Africans is to be slaves of whites: "I entreat that you permit me to serve you as a slave" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 19) – says Fatma, a young Sudanese woman to Mr. Rawlison. At the end of her visit at Mr. Rawlison's place she kisses the hands of both engineers, a British and a Polish one, and also the hands of fourteen years old Staś and eight years old Nell. As for Kali: "immediately after supper he fell on his face before Staś and Nell in token that he desired to remain their slave to the end of his life, and afterwards he also prostrated himself with due humility before Staś' short rifle" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 197). The whole mechanism of a subordination of a colonized by a hegemon is expounded in this sentence. A colonised is feed, and then, from his own initiative, he performs signs of feudal subordination to his colonial suzerain.

The discourse of subordination belongs to a sphere of primitive tribal language, since Kali sees deities in Staś and Nell ("he believed in Staś' powers", Sienkiewicz 1917, 308), even though, "constructed" ones, to a great extent, by himself. However, the rationality of this discourse is very clear, what indicates Kali's bow to the rifle, undertaken "with due humility", which could certainly be "safely" interpreted as a last remain of idolatry. A demonstration of subordination repeats in crucial moments of the narrative: "the young negro threw himself on his knees" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 299), "they stood in a long row in silence, full of admiration, with the whites of their eyes glistening, uncertain whether they should kneel or fall on their faces" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 387), "all the warriors fell on their faces so that their bodies formed a long, living deck. Not one of them dared to move, and fear prevailed in all hearts" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 356). A long, living deck of black warriors lying at the feet of Staś and Nell would evoke an association with Persian satraps, once again recalling deity-like treatment of our white heroes. At the end of the story, a black prince of one of tribes "embraced with his black

[3] Here again we can remark an interesting feature of Kali's idiolect. He talks about himself in third person, which is typical for a child on early stage of language development.

hands her [Nell's] little foot and placed it on his head in sign that through his entire life he desired to remain her slave" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 397). Nell should be read here most probably as a metonymy of England.

White people

Staś, when kidnapped with Nell, feels "humiliated by them in his pride as a white man" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 101). This pride is certified and confirmed by behaviour of other characters of the story. Even Mahdi, a spiritual and political leader of the whole country, sits up, when seeing white children approaching, even though laying position didn't disturb him to participate in a council of war with caliphs (Sienkiewicz 1917, 101).

Most probably Kali is older than Staś and knows Africa better than him, even though the latter was also born there. Still, Staś is an unquestionable leader (owns a gun). Everything the group do is performed by a command of Staś, even the most trivial acts: "Staś commanded Kali to build a fire" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 233), "By Staś' orders, Kali and Mea (…) began to gather melons" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 256), "he ordered Mea to throw into the interior of the baobab tree a few lighted boughs" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 260), "Staś ordered Mea to melt the fat" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 270). Staś is the brain of the expedition. Even when Kali dominates over him in some knowledge or skill ("Kali, who was well versed in such matters", Sienkiewicz 1917, 239), it's Staś who draws conclusions and takes decisions.

A distinction is placed already on the level of face. "It is good even to gaze at a European face" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 306) – a dying traveller says. European face means relief, European hands means salvation: "but let only one [message sent by a kite] (...) fall into European hands then we are saved" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 331). There is a whole European trinity: face, hand, and weapon. "European weapon" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 442) is a hallmark of Europeans on the African continent. Two caravans shoot in the air so as to recognize each other as Europeans and, paradoxically enough, to approach each other in a peaceful manner.

White people mean colonisation. Nonetheless, it's Kali who begs Staś for military help, in the name of the tribe of Wahima fighting against Samburu. Here, again we encounter a topos of a lack of self-reliance of Africans, necessitating whites, equipped with their developed military technology ("he would drill a few tens of warriors in shooting", Sienkiewicz 1917, 346), to solve internal, political problems of African tribes. Staś seems to be a naturally gifted governor[4]:

4 "We find him develop into an expurgated compendium of Stanley, Sir Galahad and Marco Polo" (M. K. 1912, 524).

> Accustomed to quick decisions, he already knew how he should act. To free Fumba, to rout the Samburus but not to permit a too bloody revenge, and afterwards to command peace and reconcile the belligerents, appeared to him an imperative matter not only for himself but also most beneficial for the negroes. (Sienkiewicz 1917, 386)

In Desert and Wilderness contributes in a great extent to a literary tradition of popular war/spy colonial novel, such as *The Dogs of War* by Frederick Forsyth and many others that usually adhere to such a relation of ontological dependence and subordination of black people to white people.

White people in Africa have always a lot to do.

> "What shall we do now, Staś?" Nell asked one day, (...)
> "There is plenty of work to do," the boy answered, (…) " In the first place Kali and Mea are pagans, and Nasibu, as a native of Zanzibar, is a Mohammedan. It is necessary to enlighten them, teach them the faith, and baptize them." (Sienkiewicz 1917, 386)

Staś and Nell play a role of "culture heroes", who are supposed to finish the work of creation. They fight against chaos and are going to order it into cosmos (Meletinsky 2016). One of the conditions of cosmic order is a proper religion.

White children perceive Africa as a "tabula rasa" (Cichoń 2004, 93). In the image of Biblical Adam, Staś and Nell give their own names to things and people. A slave, new servant of Nell obtains a name "Mea" (which means "my own") without even asking her about her own name (Sienkiewicz 1917, 181). A mountain has been baptized after a name of a European that pointed it out to the children:

> "The mountain ought to be called Mount Linde in geographies; and let this village be named after you, Nell."
> "Then I shall be in the geographies?" asked she with great glee. (Sienkiewicz 1917, 386)

As Anna Cichoń states:

> Local knowledge" and experiences of natives are perceived as useless. One cannot rely on it, since they seem uncertain, illegible, incommunicable — it should be replaced and "translated" by recognizable categories. This is (…) an aim of cartographer's work, who removes native names and replaces them with his own. (Cichoń 2004, 99)

The village which the children had lived in for some time is named after Nell. It seems fairly bizarre, when one takes into consideration a fact that the village is supposedly one of the most horrific places in the fictional world of the novel. What do children run across when arriving there?

> most of the huts had been burned or ruined (...), but some were still whole. (…) Before the huts lay here and there human bones and skeletons, white as chalk, for they had been cleaned by the ants (...) in the huts could be smelt the leaven of ants, and one could find in them neither the big black cockroaches, which usually swarm in all Negro hovels, nor spiders nor scorpions nor the smallest of insects. Everything had been cleaned out by the terrible 'siafu' (…) as even boas fall prey to these invincible little warriors. (Sienkiewicz 1917, 386)

What is astonishing in this description is that starting as an apparent testimony of mass murder, it imperceptibly turns out into a treaty on myrmecology. The children are prepared for the frightening view by Linde who blamed for it Mahdists fighting against British supremacy (Sienkiewicz 1917, 315). However, one must remember that the historical time of the fictional action of the story, the 1880's, is an apogee of European colonial domination in Africa, among other in Kongo, where the king of Belgium, Leopold II, during economical exploitation of this country, made a systematic genocide of more than 10 million people. Staś' and Nell's trip through Africa gets quite close to Belgian Kongo.

The smell of death floats around. Africa, since the beginning of the narrative, is characterized as a "region of death" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 6). "It is the camp of death" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 305) — Linde, a Swiss traveller, calls its own camp with such a label. His black servants are dying massively, because of "sleeping sickness". Their death is described in a very euphemistic way, as a natural phenomenon. Staś doesn't even try to rescue any of the few dozen dying people, though he has just obtained from Linde several jars of quinine. "This Africa is a charnel house", Linde repeats as a grim refrain (Sienkiewicz 1917, 305). An unspoken truth is signalized only in an allusive way: "Now they rode over a region of wretchedness, famine, bestial cruelties, and blood. They were like two poor little leaves in a storm which bore death and annihilation not only to the heads of individuals, but to whole towns and entire tribes" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 137).

The unsupportable fact of the genocide is not expressed fully as if because of mercy towards Arabs who are blamed for genocide in Africa and for slavery. An authoritative voice of an Englishman presents a final, European truth about Africa from the beginning of the story.

> ...the worst were the ivory and slave hunters. (…) They made armed expeditions into the interior of Africa, appropriating everywhere ivory tusks, and carried away thousands of people: men, women, and children. In addition they destroyed villages and settlements, devastated fields, shed streams of blood, and slaughtered without pity all who resisted. In the southern portion of the Sudan, Darfur, and Kordofan, as well as the region beyond the Upper Nile as far as the lake they depopulated some localities entirely. (Sienkiewicz 1917, 15–16)

Ivory tusk, a commodity most wanted by Leopold II, appears with no mention to the nationality of "hunters". They are not Arabs, who are enumerated separately ("But the Arabian bands made their incursions farther and farther so that Central Africa became a land of tears and blood", Sienkiewicz 1917, 16). The only sure thing is that "England (…) as you know, pursues slave-dealers all over the world" (Sienkiewicz 1917, 16). At the same time Staś and Nell have their own slaves too all the time.

Mahmud el Tayeb, the only African interpreter of "In Desert and Wilderness" I was able to read, remarks an "English point of view" (2012, 572) dominating in the way the narrator tells the story. The Sudanese researcher sums up a lot of details, starting from the history of Africa in general, and Sudan in particular, through an "ethnographic" description of Sudanese people that have nothing to do with history, nor ethnography of this region.

I started with a quote from a statement of one of scholars, calling the novel "a parable on the victory of good over evil". The best commentary to this utterance would be an excerpt from a speech of Haile Selassie I speech, almost literally re-mediated by Bob Marley to a lyric of a song:

> "Until the philosophy which holds one race
> Superior and another inferior
> Is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned
> Everywhere is war
> (…)
> And until that day, the African continent
> Will not know peace, we Africans will fight
> We find it necessary and we know we shall win
> As we are confident in the victory
> Of good over evil," (Marley 2017)

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