

Joseph Conrad's attitude to Colonial Theme in 'Heart of Darkness'

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Abstract

The ideology on which colonialism was established is almost the same throughout the world. Just we see the changing pattern of it from time to time. Writers of different ages treat it from different points of view. At the time of portraying colonial pictures in their writings, the writers sometimes become biased to it consciously or unconsciously. Joseph Conrad is well known for his treatment of colonial theme in Heart of Darkness which pricks through our hearts. Conrad's Heart of Darkness earned him a wide acclaim and accusation from critics as well as from readers. Acclaim, because it is a powerful indictment that registers the evils of colonialism. The double standard, barbarity and hypocrisy of colonialism have been unmasked here very glaringly. Accused, because Africa and the Africans have been painted dark and what made the darkness worse was that it went on in the name of brotherhood and philanthropy. But nonetheless, the author should be appreciated for depicting the white settlers' exploiting attitude and dark side of their and his own self.

Keywords: imperialism, colonialism, biasness, psychological, metaphysical, ego, superego, id, detribalization.

Joseph Conrad exposes the hypocrisy of the whites, but, he does not tell the story directly. It is narrated by a character Marlow who continually subverts his own recommendation. He is at the mercy of an introspective and brooding consciousness. Marlow has seen the darkness of enlightenment, the noble mission of which was supposed to free mankind from barbarity, superstition and darkness, but instead, it inculcated in the whites a sense of racial superiority, considering the other races backward. So, it was their duty to civilize the uncivilized non-Europeans. The object of his critique is this corrupt enlightened idealism which actually fascinates imperialist expansion but his critique is conducted in the very terms of imperialistic discourse. This idealistic view of imperialism was represented by Marlow in Heart of Darkness. As a novelist Conrad himself is much criticized for his anthropocentrism and Eurocentricism. This article shows how Conrad himself is biased to colonialism consciously or unconsciously. As a child Conrad was a victim of Russia's colonialist policies toward Poland. On account of his father's revolutionary activities on behalf of Polish freedom he, his mother and his father were exiled to Siberia. When Conrad grew up he chose to follow sea as a career because he felt it would provide him with the

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sense of openness, freedom and democracy he had not been able to feel in his childhood. Ironically the profession which he thought would take him away from the horror of colonialism often brought him closer to it. And this idea reflects in his writings.

Marlow is a device through which the novelist shows the real picture of colonialism. Marlow believes that European men truly represent the good of imperialism. But the truth is just the opposite. The reality of European imperialism in Africa is greed and evil. Marlow begins outside of London then travels to Brussels, then to Africa, the Outer Station, the Central Station, and finally, the Inner Station where Marlow meets Kurtz. Here, Marlow appears before us as a member of colonialist front. Colonialism which is an operation of discourse did not exist without a set of assumptions and beliefs encoded in language to justify the racial superiority of the whites and their subsequent action to subjugate other peoples. Drawing on the resources of a tradition that includes Dante, Goethe and many other writers, Marlow deploys the categories of perception of European culture. Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz and all Europe contributed to Marlow's narrative. He uses languages that reproduce a familiar occidental ideology of the orient as strange, exotic, sexual etc. The Nineteenth century travel tales were full of an Africa dangerously and excitingly beyond law and restraint. Here such images are used by Marlow both to narrate his own experience and to condemn the behavior of Kurtz. Marlow condemns the construction of a modern Prospero's island where Kurtz wields his technological western magic to subdue the Calibans around him into worship. But his account of his own experience is formulated through the same vocabulary of the exotic and primitive showing his bond with Kurtz.

Marlow/Conrad uses various tools to expose the many facets of evils of colonialism. But Conrad/Marlow's critique is undermined by his racist ideology. Marlow uses the unknown, remote and primitive Africa as a symbol of evil. For example, Marlow talks of their 'unspeakable rites', 'the satanic litany' of Kurtz's followers. He uses words like 'brutal', 'monstrous', 'vengeful', 'implacable evil', 'accursed', 'dark' so constantly in talking about Africa that the people of Africa begins to be tinged with the qualities that these words connote. Thus the woman who comes alongside the steamer is described in terms of wilderness. Marlow says, 'She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.' The sentence recalls Marlow's earlier observation that the stillness of the jungle was the 'stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.' Here the woman becomes the personification of the spirit of jungle. Marlow continues his description by focusing on one young man "The man seemed young-almost a boy-but you know with them it's hard to tell." Through the word 'them' he dissociates himself from the people whose tragedy is unfold of his eyes. If we assume that Marlow of "Heart of Darkness" is using the pronoun 'them' in the same way he uses it in 'Lord Jim', then we can only conclude that he finds blacks to be morally inferior to himself and his friends, the 'us' of the story. Conrad's main underlying criticism of imperialism in Heart of Darkness is that it destroys indigenous cultures. His portrayal of African culture in the story is admittedly less detailed than his description of Malaysia in his Eastern novels. Since he spent only six months in Congo, as against some six years sailing to the East, we can understand his reluctance to attempt an authoritative portrait. Nonetheless, the story conveys a basic respect for African life. While Conrad does not idealize tribal culture, he still denounces the intervention that disrupted it. Since all forms of imperialism, not just Leopold's, entailed detribalization, his denunciation is presumably general. If Kurtz is the heart or soul of darkness repressed beneath the accretions and delusions of civilization,

what is Marlow's relation, obsessive it is, to Kurtz? As organizing and expressive consciousness, passionately desirous of the Kurtzian eloquence so as better to tell the Kurtzian secrets, Marlowish mind- we might say ego or even superego-to an id identified with those dark lusts in the jungle. When Kurtz tries to return to jungle, Marlow must prevent him. Mind must detect and control the unconscious atavistic urges, repress the regressive.

The closest Conrad comes to a direct indictment of the British in *Heart of Darkness* is in writing that Kurtz was "educated partly in England" and his mother was "half-English." Although Kurtz as an imperialist did not practice England's but rather Leopold's method of exploitation (raiding the country), Conrad here indicates that England itself had some responsibility for the atrocities in the Congo. Just as "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (p. 50), all Europe, including England, sanctioned the creation of Leopold's Congo at Berlin. Leopold's rule could not have come into being without the imperial rivalry of the major powers; his crimes could not have continued without their reluctance to risk their balance by intervening. Throughout his fiction Conrad condemned imperialism of all types, efficient and wasteful, benevolent and malevolent, British and non-British.

According to Chinua Achebe, Conrad has an obsession with skin colour: he describes a man as being black, having long black legs and long black arms. Achebe mentions a scene in the novel where after Kurtz' death, the manager's boy is described as putting his 'insolent black head in the doorway' (Conrad 69). A central point in Achebe's criticism is that Conrad thinks everything should be in their right place and how tragedy happens when fine Europeans travel into the heart of darkness. Cannibals are fine people when they are in their place. Africans are described as savages with wild eyes using an unrefined language consisting of grunts and short phrases sounding like a violent babble. Africa is shown as the other world with bestiality contrasting the intelligence and refinement of Europe. The Africans are sometimes referred to as specimens, Marlow comments on how one African is an improved specimen because he can fire up a vertical boiler. The point is further exemplified in the discussion of the meaning of the two rivers in *Heart of Darkness*. How travelling on the Congo river is like going back in time to the "earliest beginnings of the world" (Conrad 33) and how Thames has also once been a dark place but is now in light and peace. The description of Africa includes it being a prehistoric earth with prehistoric men acting in a "black and incomprehensible frenzy". The Africans are howling and leaping and are described as not inhuman, meaning he did find them inhuman at one point. It is probably at this point Marlow realizes that the tribesmen are in fact human, even if he still considers them as brute savages. He mentions how they have faces like grotesque masks, strong muscles, energy and a wild vitality. To Chinua Achebe, this is Conrad describing things in their place. *Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks." But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, and the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. It is not the differences that worry Conrad but the lurking hints of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too "has been one of the dark places of the earth." It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

Marlow's refusal to try to understand the significance of the rites of the Africans stems from his conviction that they are abominous. But by believing that these actual rites, the customs of the same people whom the Belgians were exploiting, are exercises of evil and the knowledge of them should be suppressed. Marlow is in effect, a member of the colonialist front for which Kurtz wrote-The International Society for the suppression of Savage Customs. And as long as he refuses to understand their true significances, as long as he believes they should be suppressed, then he has cried with every colonizer 'Exterminate all the brutes'. Conrad's stress on cannibalism, his identification of African customs with violence, lust, madness, his metaphor of bestiality, death and darkness, his suggestion that traveling in Africa is like traveling backward in time to primeval, infantile and hellish stages of existence emanates from his insight. Now the question is whether Conrad/Marlow's beliefs and conviction regarding Africa as encoded in the narrative of Heart of Darkness is conscious or unconscious. Drawing on the insight of Karl Jung who propounded the theory of racial unconscious, we can say that Marlow/Conrad's presentation of the Africans and Africa in this way is not wholly deliberate. As Edward Said observed; 'No production of knowledge in human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances'. Edward Said's words implicitly recognize the value of agency in that task of representation. In postcolonial discourse, this touches the fundamental chord of the dispute around identity formation. In other words, the contemporary western discourse of colonialism had a great sway in his identity formation and so cannot represent an alien socio-political reality objectively. In that regard he represents culture from 'outside'. It can be concluded that the contemporary ideology got infused with his belief about Africans, product of this conflation. In so far as it is a byproduct of the story rather than an intended one of the story, it reveals the limitation of Conrad's nation rather than the existence of an absolutely racist streak in him. Nevertheless, for the modern readers his limitation reduces the significance of his achievement as a psychologist, a moralist and humanist. To Edward Said, Conrad's narrative is bound to a certain time and place. Conrad does not see an alternative to imperialism and the natives he wrote about seemed to be incapable of independence. He could not foresee what would happen when imperialism came to an end. Conrad allows readers today to see an Africa that is not made up of dozens of European colonies, even if he himself might have had a very limited idea of what Africa was like. To him, Conrad realized that "darkness" could be colonized or illuminated. Conrad's limitation is that even though he understood that colonialism in one way was just dominance and land-grabbing, he still could not understand that imperialism had to come to an end, so that the natives could live their lives free from European domination.

Historically Marlow would have us feel that the Africans are the innocent victims of the white man's heart darkness; psychologically and metaphysically he would have us believe that they have the power to turn the white man's heart black. That is Marlow equates the primitive with the evil and physical blackness of Africans with a spiritual darkness. The physical is confused with the metaphysical, the literal with the metaphysical. Though Marlow feels repugnance for the white man's greed and his brutal inhumanity to his fellow man, yet he longs for evidence that Europeans can display pure purpose, rational power, and benevolent dominance over Africa and Africans. He retains notions of the supremacy of Europeans from his own education and even when he sees evidence which refutes that supremacy, he wishes to retain a belief in it. Marlow can never see the Africans as fully human and he can never bring himself fully to condemn the imperialist project in Africa.

When he lies to the intended, he participates in the lie that says imperialism is justly supported by sound ideals. By doing nothing to stop the devastation caused by the imperialism in Africa, he tactfully accepts the inhumanity of mankind to its fellow man and allows it to continue on the Dark Continent.

One night, when Marlow enters his cabin with a candle, he finds Kurtz conscious and with a look full of pride, terror, and despair. He mumbles that he is ready to die. Then at the moment of Kurtz's death, Marlow hears the man softly cry out, "The horror! The horror!" as if summarizing the whole of imperialism in Africa. Here "the horror" refers to the abominable deeds he committed out there in the jungle. Marlow blows the candle out and leaves the room to join the Europeans in the dining room. In England, Marlow visits Mr. Kurtz' intended and gives her Kurtz old letters. She remembers what a great man Mr. Kurtz was and how much she loved him. She also wants to know what his last words were, to which Marlow replies "your name". Through this statement it is evident that Marlow is a product of imperialism so he could not overcome it. As Marlow is the spokesman of Conrad, he is a subject to be criticized. Given what we know of Marlow's ultimate attitude toward the Congo experience, the surprise is that criticism can so widely persist in thinking Marlow's whitewashing capitulation merely a white lie, a sacrificial violation of his own spiritual insight out of humanist charity. The import of this is that the real darkness is not in Africa but in Europe, its heart is not in the breasts of Black Africans but in all whites. On the second level this is ironic because what is apparently white is black.

Finally, The novel indeed could be counted as a masterpiece of the world literature as it reflects clash of the civilization at his time. He is to be justified in depicting the dark side of the white colonial civilization. He displayed utmost subjectivity by displaying his own hypocrisy at the last moment. It tells us that technological superiority failed to bring the riddance from savagery. Only the outlook could be different but we all remain wild and selfish in different forms- sometimes outwardly white and polished.

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