

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: A Postcolonial Reading

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Abstract: Postcolonialism is the critical academic study of the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands. More specifically, it is a critical theory analysis of the history, culture, literature and discourse of (usually, European) imperial power. Now the question is-can Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) be considered as a postcolonial novel in the light of above concept? Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) may be read from many perspectives. Written in the Victorian period this short novel covers many issues which are equally relevant even for today. Imperialism, Capitalism, racism, white man's burden, civilized-savage binary, Western or European discourse and many other issues that have been touched upon within this short canvas. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) tells the journey of Marlow through the African jungle and his search for European Mistah Kurtz who exploits the natives by imposing violence. It is actually based upon Conrad's own experience in Congo. Conrad virtually learned how Europeans exploited and traded the natives for their own benefit during his own journey. In spite of diverse criticism, the book is regarded as a subtle attack on imperialism and criticizes immoral treatments of the European colonizers on African in the late 19th century. Keith Booker states that "the book deals with issues such as imperialism, capitalism, race, and gender that were very much at the forefront of the turn-of-the century European mind. Conrad's ambivalent treatment of these issues is extremely representative of the way they were treated in any number of European discourses of the time" (217). Besides, Chinua Achebe in his "An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" comments that *Heart of Darkness* (1899) projects the image of Africa as 'the other world' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality' (338). Although Achebe advocates that the novel genuinely champions the cause of colonialism and mercilessly condemns Conrad as "a bloody racist", I personally consider that Conrad does not intend to write the novel to appreciate colonialism and to justify the imperial enterprise as a way to civilize the savage. Rather Conrad very skilfully hints the failure of the European

discourse through the depiction of the pictures of excessive greed, exploitative mentality and capitalistic attitude of the so called European civilized people like, Kurtz, Manager, Brick-maker and many others. In doing so Conrad has given us an opportunity to undergo a contrapuntal reading of the novel which will help us to understand how Conrad has deconstructed binary oppositions of colonialism by subverting the grand-narrative of European discourse about African in 19th century.

Key terms: Colonialism, Imperialism, Civilization, Discourse, Deconstruction, Subversion, Grand narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism starts in the 16th century when European countries started invading the unexplored areas over the world. By virtue of their legacy Europeans consider them as civilized and enlightened, on the other hand those who are not European have been considered as savage and 'other'. Therefore these binary oppositions of 'self' and 'other' constitute the essence of colonialism. So colonialism is about the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. According to Lois Tyson, "colonialist ideology [...] was based on the colonizer's assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the land they invaded" (419). The colonizers consider that the culture of their ancestors was extremely civilized and that is why they define native people as savage or undeveloped. In other words, the colonizers see themselves as superior to the colonized people. In addition to this, colonizers think that they set up examples for the colonial people. So the colonized people "were considered 'other', different and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human" (Tyson 420). These binary oppositions are clearly reflected through out Conrad's "Heart of Darkness". The book portrays the writer's own ideas and experiences through its narrator Marlow who is one of the most important characters

of the novel. Marlow would like to hide immoral activities of the Europeans from his listeners since colonialism proves the corruption of the Europeans in Africa. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899) the natives remain an element of fantasy for Marlow until he meets them. These natives represent the interruption of European fantasy for a moment, that is, they are real and a shock for Marlow (Brannigan). Marlow's rooted assumptions about the African people which he assimilated from European discourse have been shaken when he physically confronts them. Marlow shockingly describes the natives as, "they were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. 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 and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin" (*Heart of Darkness* 19). This reality helps the reader to explore the other side of colonialism and thereby gives them scope to question the legitimacy of colonial enterprise. Besides, European colonial activities in Africa and its resultant exploitation have been portrayed through the true observation of an European, Marlow. As a result Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) assumes the status of a postcolonial novel rendering an effect of writing back literature.

DISCUSSION

In Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' the postcolonial elements are depicted through the attitude of the European colonizers towards the African people. Marlow cannot exactly define the natives; however, the only thing he is sure is that they suffer under the control of the Europeans. Besides, he is aware that the Europeans also give harm to nature in order to earn more. The preservation of trees and animals is now treated as ecological concern which is also postcolonial in effect. Marlow realized that the Europeans destroy not only the natives but also the Jungle. He states, "I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed and the devil of hot desire;" (18). The repetition of the word 'devil' underlines the brutality of colonialism and imperialism that the Europeans imposed on the natives in Africa. They dominated almost all parts of Africa to get benefit

from the natives. In his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Edward Said puts forward that : "In Europe itself at the end of the nineteenth century scarcely a corner of life was untouched by the facts of empire. The economies were hungry for overseas markets, raw materials, cheap labor, and profitable land. Defence and foreign policy establishments were more and more committed to the maintenance of vast tracts of distant territory and large members of subjugated peoples (8). Said criticizes the dominance of powerful countries over African countries in order to exploit them. Marlow also is against this kind of exploitation under the guise of civilizing mission and therefore critiques the act of colonialism. Marlow as a European feels ashamed of what Kurtz has done in Congo when he learns his immoral acts, and that is why he cannot put them into words in his meeting with Kurtz's Intended. Marlow says that it is impossible to reveal the truth that he experienced during his journey, 'No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes it's truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone ...', (32). Marlow means that minority of the Europeans is critical about the idea of colonialism inspite of the fact that they get benefit from it. That is they do not approve immoral acts of their citizens as exploiting the 'other' only for material purpose is nothing but the act of black-man's burden. The novel reflects the violence and cruelty of the European which are the integral part of colonialism. Besides, it subverts the legitimacy of colonial discourse as the pictures of oppression and violence have been brought to the European reader through an Englishman. For example, Marlow tells, "[a] nigger was being beaten nearby. They said he had caused the fire in some way, be that as it may, he was screeching most horribly" (*Heart of Darkness* 27). Marlow feels pity for the natives unlike other colonizers. His sympathetic feeling also charged with the critical evaluation of the justification of colonialism. This temperament is obviously postcolonial. Besides, though Conrad is sure that the natives cannot be cannibals, he gives evidence of cannibalism in order to manipulate the European through the main character of the novel. Marlow shows that the cannibals are simple human being and rather more humble, faithful and industrious than that of the Europeans. They saved Marlow's life and ate no one of the white men in the

ship. This deconstructs the European assumption of cannibalism. Marlow is critical of the fact that even the cannibals have self-restraint which the Europeans lack. Mistah Kurtz, Manager, Brick-maker and many other Europeans who are driven by the incurably greedy impulse of accumulating wealth. Through the end of the novel, the African 'others' are presented as the dark side of Europe. Their situation is shown as the consequence of historical distance. The Explanation may strengthen the concepts of the European's "as civilized, enlightened, at a more advanced stage of intelligence, and ability than Africans" (Brannigan 146). However, I think that there is no distance between Europe and Africa contrary to various scholars as Conrad attempts to deconstruct this common belief in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Apart from this, the natives are even addressed as black shapes or shadow to dehumanize them in some parts of the novel, in that; none of the natives has proper names. The real purpose of Conrad is that he wants to remind the inadequate attention his citizens pay for the native, since they are no more than a creature or a cannibal for the Europeans. Thus European colonisation is a process of 'othering' the African people in the name of civilizing the uncivilized. Therefore, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is a critique of the failure of European colonialism.

The commercial attitude of the European people is reflected through the symbolic significance of Ivory. Additionally, darkness also symbolizes ironically the moral and spiritual vacuity of the European people. They are so indulged in hoarding ivory that they must gain as much ivory as they can by any means. Mistah Kurtz was most obsessed with this lucrative trade of accumulating ivory and for this reason he can follow any means; fair or foul. Kurtz's hut is surrounded by the skulls of men turning their face to the house symbolizes the brutality and the authority of an European agent over the native. Marlow is very much critical of the fact that the so called ordered representative of the so called European discourse can go to the limit of savagery and brutality that even the natives are devoid of. Marlow hates the cruel treatment against the natives and he respects them as human. As a colonial agent Kurtz is morally responsible for educating the savage natives besides utilizing them and says that "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving,

instructing" (*Heart of Darkness* 40). But by exploiting and killing the natives, Kurtz, himself becomes diabolic and savage. And his brutality and savagery inspite of getting proper education of western discourse have put a big question mark before the European demand of being civilized. Marlow clearly describes Kurtz's mistreatments and greediness through his physical appearance; "I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence" (*Heart of Darkness* 95). Kurtz's final utterance of "The horror! The horror!" (*HoD90*) is probably the counter narrative of the horror that Kurtz created in the mind of the natives through his horrible exploitative enterprise. And the Company's boy's ludicrous commentary on his spiritual as well as his moral demise as "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" (*HoD90*) is a severe attack on the validity of colonialism. Moreover Kurtz's utterance of the words "The Horror! The Horror" (*HoD90*) before his death reflects his feeling of repentance despite the fact that he writes "Exterminate all the brutes" (63) in his report about the future guidance of the natives. Conrad's intention may be to criticize colonialism implicitly through the utterance of these words. Moore expresses that "Conrad hated imperialism in central Africa because of its savageness, selfishness, and devastation. Kurtz's final words 'the horror', 'the horror' are about how a civilized man can change to savagery when there is no restriction" (127). In fact, the horror does not stem from the savagery of the natives—Therefore Kurtz can be considered as corruption brought to Africa from Europe (Booker 223). Marlow supports this idea by stating that "I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (*HoD27*). So, the intention with which the white Europeans meet the black Africans is a total failure. This idea efficiently critiques the legitimacy of colonialism in this novel.

There are other vital issues too that are very helpful in the justification of reading *Heart of Darkness* (1899) from postcolonial perspective. Brannigan indicates that "Africa is merely the fictional projection of a European fantasy in which Europe is the only truth" (144). The natives are seen as inferior when compared to the Europeans and this is the only truth that cannot

be denied. But Conrad implies that this is not acceptable throughout the novel since his own experiences in Africa contradict with the common belief about colonialism in England. It is through his fictional character Marlow that he reflects the opposite reality. The reference of Roman Conquest of Britain reminds the reader of the exploitative and oppressive colonial legacy. Selfishness and hypocrisy of the white men have been reflected in the futility of their projected constructive works. They had planned a project to build a railway line in the Congo. The failure of the project is hinted through the depiction of blasted rock, deserted useless boiler, a large heap of rusty rails and pieces of decaying machinery. Firing of guns aimlessly indicates the aimlessness of European colonialism. The efficiency of the cannibals to guide the ship in comparison with the European's inefficiency to justify their colonial end to enlighten and develop the African natives, ultimately subverts the singular assumption of colonial discourse and thereby paves the way to an alternative discursive narrative.

CONCLUSION

So, to conclude, it can be said Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) may be read explicitly and implicitly from the postcolonial perspective. As it reflects the failure of colonial practice in the dark region of Africa, the savagery and the excessive greed of the European to accumulate wealth in the way of collecting ivory, the corruptions of the European agents like Kurtz, Manager, Brick-maker and many others, their exploitative and inhuman tendency toward the African natives, the novel can no doubt be read as a postcolonial novel. And above all through the fictional narrator Marlow Conrad has very realistically made the readers of all time and place aware of the true and brutal reality of European colonialism. And in so doing Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) deconstructs the European colonial discourse or "grand narrative" of European colonialism guiding the readers and the critics to approach the novel with postcolonial perspectives.

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