

A Critical Study Of Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* As A Post-Colonial Novel

Summi Jan

Postgraduate student English
Central University of Kashmir
Nowgam Srinagar Kashmir India.

Abstract: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1902 is widely regarded as a prominent European literary masterpiece from the late 19th Century. It is an intricate work that can be analysed through several literary perspectives. Postcolonial theory is one important theory that can be used to examine it. The paper focuses on the portrayal and criticism of European colonialism in Africa as depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, with particular emphasis on two characters; Marlowe and Kurtz. Marlow is the novel's narrator, while Kurtz is the main colonial agent in the novel. The novel portrays the stark truths of imperialism, observing the exploitation, cruelty, and dehumanization of indigenous African people by European colonizers. Conrad criticizes the inhumane treatment of the indigenous people of Africa and the practice of imperialism, mainly through the character of Kurtz in the novel. The novel effectively depicts the sombre and ruinous aspects of European colonialism in Africa.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Imperialism, Civilisation, Civilised, Savage.

Post-colonial Theory: An Introduction:

Postcolonial theory is an analytical framework that examines the cultural, political, and economic consequences of colonialism and imperialism. It is an academic discipline that analyses the impact of colonization and the lived experiences of countries and persons who were once colonized. Postcolonial literary theory examines the impact of external oppression and economic exploitation on indigenous communities and their lands. It focuses on how "Third World" civilizations were colonized and subjugated by European countries, as well as how these people responded and resisted these intrusions. Post-colonialism emerged in the late twentieth century as a reaction to the historical consequences of colonialism. It draws from various disciplines, particularly literature, history, sociology, and anthropology.

Post-colonialism mainly analyses conflicts between cultures, usually between a colonial power and its corresponding colonised one. The key concepts in Postcolonial studies include identity, ideology, language, hybridity, diaspora, hegemony, ethnicity, mimicry, subaltern, double consciousness, decolonization, othering, epistemic violence, etc.

Postcolonial theory has been formulated and advanced by numerous important theorists. Edward Said made significant contribution to postcolonial studies through his breakthrough work, *Orientalism* (1978), which established the basis for this academic discipline. Said conducted a thorough analysis of how the West views the East and how knowledge of the "Orient" was formed within the context of imperial domination. Other critical theorists who have significantly contributed to the development of postcolonial theory include Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Chinua Achebe, Albert Memmi, Aime Cesaire, etc.

The novel *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad, prominently explores the issue of colonialism. It primarily examines the cultural conflict between Europeans and the indigenous African population. Europeans possess advanced technological capabilities, allowing them to exert dominance over Africans ruthlessly. Conrad recounts numerous examples of the Africans being subject to terrible treatment, enslaved, overworked, shackled, and abandoned to perish, thus highlighting the dark side of European colonialism.

About the Author:

Joseph Conrad was born in December 1857 in Ukraine to parents of Polish descent. His parents were advocates of Polish nationalism, and his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was both a writer and a political activist. His family experienced political oppression, resulting in their forced relocation to Russia. Conrad's parents both passed away before he reached the age of twelve, and he was thereafter cared for by his uncle. Conrad later moved to France and England, eventually becoming a British citizen in 1886.

Although he had become a British citizen by naturalization, he nevertheless identified himself as a Polish citizen and always preferred to be recognized as a Pole. Conrad began writing in English, his third language,

in his late thirties. His first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, was published in 1895. In addition to this, Conrad has many other works to his credit. The important among them include; *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Typhoon* (1902), *Nostramo* (1904), *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911).

Conrad's literary works continue to have a significant impact due to their profound psychological observations, complex storytelling methods, and critical exploration of imperialism and the essence of humanity. They offer profound insights into the human condition and the socio-political dynamics of his time. Conrad's works incorporate a wide range of themes. The key thematic concerns that permeate his works include imperialism and colonialism, alienation, absurdity and futility of human endeavours, human nature and psychology, existentialism, moral ambiguity and complexity, etc.

The combination of his childhood experience, marked by the oppressive colonial rule in his deeply humiliated homeland, and his citizenship in the most advanced global power inevitably resulted in him embodying the perspective of both the oppressed and the oppressor. As a result, Conrad began to identify himself with both those who suffer from oppression and those who inflict it. This dual loyalty or inclination serves as the foundation for a thorough examination of Conrad's inclination towards colonialism, a topic that may go unnoticed by many.

***Heart of Darkness* as a Postcolonial Novel:**

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1902, is widely regarded as a prominent European literary masterpiece from the late 19th century. It was first published as a serialized novella in Blackwood's Magazine and later as a book in 1902. The novel chronicles the journey of a sailor named Charles Marlow as he leads a riverboat expedition into the Congo Free State via the Congo River in pursuit of Kurtz, a European individual who oppresses the indigenous population by subjecting them to acts of aggression. The purpose of the mission is to locate Kurtz, an ivory trader who has gained fame among the indigenous tribes of Congo (Africa), who regard him as a god. The Belgian Company, engaged in the trading of ivory, has lost communication with Kurtz and consequently hires Marlow to find him. The story is primarily derived from Conrad's encounters in the Congo, where he witnessed Europeans' exploitation and trading of the indigenous people for their gain.

Heart of Darkness remains a revered classic in academic circles and is widely taught in institutions worldwide for its unique European critique of the colonial endeavour during its time. It is an intricate work that can be analysed through several literary perspectives. Postcolonial theory is one important theory that can be used to examine it. Essentially, the novel explores the moral and power dynamics throughout the era of European colonialism. It focuses on the contrasting notions of "savage" and "civilized" people and highlights Conrad's belief that there is minimal distinction between them. According to Keith Booker, "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 how they were treated in any number of European discourses of the time" (217). The novel explores the British Empire's colonial rule in Africa and Conrad's experiences of traveling abroad. It extensively explores Conrad's contemplations on the interplay between the Western and non-Western worlds and the relationship between civilization and barbarism. It describes the stark truths of imperialism, observing the exploitation, cruelty, and dehumanization of the indigenous Africans by European colonizers. *Heart of Darkness* is considered a condemnation of imperialism and denounces the unethical treatment of European colonizers in Africa throughout the 19th century. Conrad effectively depicts the sombre and ruinous aspects of European colonialism in Africa.

The criticism of European colonialism in the novel is mainly brought to the fore through two characters; Marlow and Kurtz. Conrad establishes a Euro-centric narrative pattern by choosing Marlow, a white European, as the narrator and the representative of the White perspective. He bestows upon Marlow much authority in expressing his views. Marlow, the novel's narrator, acknowledges the systematic subjugation and abuse of Africans by European colonizers. He gains direct insight into the brutal truth of colonization, witnessing labourers who are physically drained from their work in deplorable conditions, colleagues engaged in a cutthroat competition to maximize their gains and status, and subjugated people who are oppressed. It is as though the colonial organization is a steamroller that is systematically destroying anything and everyone that is in its path, all in the pursuit of economic gain. Marlow, Conrad's alter ego, encounters "a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort" (Conrad 31) during his voyage. The white man claims to be working for the "improvement" of the region. Marlow struggles to comprehend the concept of "improvement" until he comes across "the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead" (31).

Marlow's aunt takes pride in her role in facilitating Marlow's journey to Congo as one of the 'workers' and as an "emissary of light" entrusted with the duty of "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (Conrad 18). Ironically, the Europeans have positioned themselves in Congo as the saviour and purveyor of enlightenment. However, they are merely engaged in the suppression, oppression, and degradation of the native population.

The indigenous people are a mystery to Marlowe, but he is sure that they endure suffering as a result of European domination. In addition, he acknowledges that Europeans also inflict damage upon nature in pursuit of greater profits. He perceives the colonizers as morally wicked and motivated by selfishness, exploiting the land and indigenous population for financial gain. In other words, Marlowe realizes that Europeans not only harm the indigenous people but also cause destruction to the environment. He states:

I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land, I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. (Conrad 24-25).

Violence is an integral part of European colonialism and it is consistently present throughout the story. As an illustration, Marlow recounts an incident where a local, who was believed to be responsible for starting a fire, was subjected to severe physical punishment, "[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" (Conrad 36-37). This incident serves as an illustration of European aggression towards Africans. Moreover, it demonstrates the novel's subversion, as Conrad (a European) exposes the savagery of his people.

Apart from Marlow, Conrad criticizes the inhumane treatment of the indigenous people and the practice of imperialism through Kurtz. Mr. Kurtz, the central character in the novel serves as the colonial agent. Initially, upon his arrival in Congo, he was "a first-class agent" (Conrad 28) and a "very remarkable person" (116). However, shortly after arriving there, he deviated from his initial intention of transforming his station into "a center . . . for humanizing, improving, instructing" (52). Kurtz succumbed to the "fascination of the abomination" (8), as evidenced by the presence of human heads on poles surrounding his residence. Undoubtedly, the desire for power and wealth has a significant corrupting influence on him as noted by Kurtz's Russian friend who says, "the appetite for more ivory" (94) has corrupted Kurtz. In other words, Kurtz has a wretched existence due to his vigorous pursuit of the ivory trade.

Kurtz epitomizes the savagery inherent in colonialism and is a representative of the barbarism of colonialism. Because of his intense involvement in the brutal colonial cause, he has seen first-hand the ugliness of barbarism and false civilization. The distinction between civilization and pseudo-civilization is clearly visible. Kurtz's ruthless treatment of the native people exemplifies one facet of fake civilization, while another is seen in his actions. Kurtz employs the method of mystical conquest and the tactic of "integration" to gain the recognition and acceptance in the indigenous population. He displays no fear towards natives and instead threatens them. The Africans remain still until Kurtz issues instructions to them. As Marlowe remarks about Kurtz, "He was not afraid of the natives; they would not stir till Mr. Kurtz gave the word" (Conrad 96). When Kurtz gave orders, the natives promptly gathered around his residence and every tribe chief crawled to see him on a daily basis. Suddenly, Kurtz is portrayed as the leader of cannibalistic tribes.

Kurtz is the embodiment of the whole of Europe. Marlow reflects on his identity: "His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad 81). Kurtz is referred to as an emissary of civilization and a representative of European civilization because of his significant contribution to it. To create "boundless practical benefits" for the Africans, he travelled to Africa. However, instead of enlightening native Africans, he talks about 'eradicating all the barbarians' in his report to the "European Association for Barbaric Customs." Kurtz's portrayal of Western society is deceptive because his representation of Western culture is at odds with their actions.

Conrad does not show the dark side of colonialism merely through the sufferings of the indigenous people of Africa but also by exposing or disclosing the hidden motives that make them occupy colonized territories. European industrialization is inextricably linked to the availability of raw resources from the African continent and the high demand for commodities originating from the continent. Europe imports large quantities of Africa's natural resources, including ivory. One of the key motivators of colonizers is their desire for financial gain. The substantial economic advantages of ivory trading serve as the primary incentives that captivate Kurtz and numerous others, as depicted in the novel. Europeans introduced a

superficial kind of civilization to the African continent. They used the pretext of bringing civilization to the continent to advance the economic interests of their own countries.

Kurtz imposes more control on the indigenous population to acquire more and more wealth and resources; however, his greediness and brutality ultimately result in his demise. Regarding Kurtz's abhorrent nature, Marlow asserts, "I had to deal with a being to which I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke himself – his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man!" (Conrad 109). Kurtz exercises unrestrained autonomy due to the absence of any authority. To make more money, he also chooses to live in the wild, forgetting his civilized life. Kurtz's involvement in the ivory trade has led to such a level of corruption that he has severed his contacts with Europe.

Kurtz exhibits such extreme brutality towards the indigenous people that he experiences remorse in the end, as revealed through the phrase "The Horror! The Horror" (Conrad 115), which he utters before his death. Kurtz's final lament prior to his death can be interpreted as the realization of his mistakes. It depicts his emotions of guilt and his assessment of white civilization's shortcomings.

According to Conrad, colonization makes the White settlers lazy; it exposes their flaws and weakness, and makes them feel proud of being White in a conquered and uncivilized region. It also reinforces the intolerable hypocrisy with which they cover their selfish endeavours. Colonization brings out the evil from within them. Conrad's sympathy for the colonized is evident at multiple instances in the novel, mainly through his explicit anti-colonial expressions. He disregards colonialism and is of the view that "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (Conrad 9). Despite portraying the dark side of colonialism, Conrad cannot escape the criticism of certain critics. In his controversial article "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Chinua Achebe claims that Conrad's novel "*Heart of Darkness* 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" (15). Some critics are of the view that the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* provides evidence of Conrad's racism. Achebe categorizes Conrad as a "bloody racist" who attempts to portray his "civilized" society in contrast to the "darkness" of a "primitive" Africa, thereby dehumanizing Africans. Yuandan Huang also believes that "Prejudice against and belittling of the Congo region and its indigenous people prevails in the whole work" (311).

A general analysis of *Heart of Darkness* reveals that although the themes and challenges explored in Conrad's works reflect a postcolonial perspective, his cultural commitments establish his place in the Western canon. It is important to note that despite his sympathy for the suffering natives and his sense of injustice, Conrad remains loyal to Western cultural principles. Conrad acknowledges the violent nature of colonizers, yet he regards them as more civilized. He describes Africa as a distinct realm, far more primitive and disagreeable than Europe. In addition, a significant portion of the novel in consideration depicts the indigenous people and their traditions as untamed and unfamiliar to Marlow, who serves as the author's archetype. Marlow goes as far as to perceive the conduct of Africans as somewhat lacking in human qualities and acknowledges the peculiarity of the idea that he has a "remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (Conrad 58). An event from Kurtz's report to the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" reveals that the writer perceives the African culture as untamed.

Conclusion:

It is noteworthy that despite being extensively analysed and referenced through numerous perspectives, *Heart of Darkness* continues to gain significant attention from critics and researchers. Conrad reveals that the covert objective of colonization involves looting the resources of indigenous people and subjecting them to inhumane treatment. Additionally, he portrays the suffering of the colonizers who found themselves in an unfamiliar and hostile environment, enduring terrible mistreatment and encounters. According to Conrad, colonialism, despite its original intentions, can only result in "The Horror!" and harm both the colonizer and the colonized. Although the oppressor and the oppressed do not encounter an equal number of disadvantages, nevertheless, both experience pain. Conrad's viewpoint on colonization is that both the colonizer and the colonized suffer from its dreadful outcomes, leaving no one unaffected.

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