

CRITIQUE OF IMPERIALISM OVERSHADOWING THE PRESENCE OF RACISM IN CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf, in her essay 'Joseph Conrad', wrote "If as novelist you wish to test man in all his relationships, the proper antagonist is man; his ordeal is in society, not solitude." Conrad, through the semi autobiographical eyes of Marlow, who is released into a primitive society in the African interiors, questions the stereotyped cultural gap between the 'civilized' and the 'barbaric'. He also explores the extremities of a coloniser with the character of Kurtz. Kurtz, a white man invading the cultural space of the native African tribe for his personal greed, goes mad as he gets sucked into its centre unable to escape. While exploring the seedy underbelly of imperialism the text challenges the permutability of cultures and its resistance to go hand in hand with each other. Through the process, Conrad also builds a background image of the native African tribe which, I argue, appears to be the pigeonholed projection of a white man's perspective. Thus the objective of this paper is to look at how his critique of the white man's burden towers above his, perhaps unintentional, but unfair portrayal of the black man's image and culture.

Key Words: Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad, Imperialism, Racism, Culture

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The brilliance of Conrad and his place in the English canon is beyond question. While his work is a savage critique of the colonial occupation, the foundation upon which the critique is built on needs to be questioned. A post-colonial deconstruction of Conrad's anti-imperialist text projects a two sided criticism. One the overt imperial critique and the other, the perhaps unintentional racial picture. Setting aside the intentional fallacies is the way to flip to the other side and reveal the concealed racial simulacrum. This argument puts Conrad in the position of a conscious anti-imperialist and an unconscious racist.

This line of thought emerged after Chinua Achebe's famous lecture on the Image of Africa at the University of Massachusetts in which he called Conrad a "thoroughgoing racist" who presented Africans as one dimensional stereotypes and savages.

'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 beastiality.'
(Achebe 251)

The raw portrayal of Africa which adds to the realism of the text in terms of Conrad's understanding of the country is put to a debate often because of the affective fallacy. The understanding of the reader about the European continent which considers itself civilized, leads to assumptions about Africa being uncivilized - the European antithesis. This contrast originates from the pigeonholed projection of a white man's perspective. The crime becomes more severe as Conrad's work transforms itself into the 'permanent literature' of English read by generations. A realistic portrayal of the African subcontinent from African eyes may not be so severe in the

criticism of the continent and the natives. In a world before globalization, this universal credibility of the author and subsequently the book makes it a guide to the African continent and the image it projects is very different from the real one. The book is filled with the “dark” and the “black” lexicography – “The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy”. This darkness that compliments the title and adorns various other passages of the novel, also alludes to the colour of the skin and not just the darkness of the colonial heart. Black is a shade darker in this book. Ugliness is extreme and savagery barbaric.

‘They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks— these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there.’ (Conrad 78)

The counter-criticism is that the sentiments are that of the protagonist Marlowe and it shows the ugly face of colonialism. But Achebe points out (255) that the author neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. The message delivered by Conrad is a marred photograph of a pristine land taken by Marlowe in the wrong light, from the wrong angle. Conrad’s inability in distancing himself from Marlowe only shows his attachment to the character’s mind. The close similarity between the lives of the author and the narrator also gives an autobiographical connection between the two. Conrad’s psychological connection to Marlowe has been described by the author himself in the author’s note written in 1917.

‘For all his assertiveness in matters of opinion he is not an intrusive person. He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony...of all my people he’s the one that has never been a vexation to my spirit.’ (Conrad 4)

Achebe rightfully remarks that (256) Conrad is more charitable to one European in his story than to all the natives. Africa, a Darwinian testing ground, acts as a stage for the madness of one white man, Kurtz. The description of the terrain resonates with that of the natives, wild untamed and dark. The African natives are used in the book as a mere menagerie. It is more of a story of the psychological conditions of the white man in a difficult setting than that of the

alarming evils of colonization. The book is a journey towards Kurtz. The impact of this character is further evident in Francis Ford Coppola's path-breaking movie 'Apocalypse now', inspired by Heart of Darkness. The movie exposes the reality of war, not colonization. The background has been changed entirely while retaining the character of Kurtz and Marlowe (called Captain Willard in the movie). The exploited Africans were replaced with the Vietnamese and war replaced imperialism.

In *Apocalypse Now*, the narrative on the natives has been restricted to antiquated paganism, outlandish facial paintings and naked, neglected corpses hanging from the vines of the jungles in Cambodia, where Kurtz is a demi-god to them. The natives are not the most powerful characters here, by any stretch of human imagination. Instead, they are presented as a community of the exploited, not individual humans. This imagery of the hapless native is reflected in the attitude of the American photojournalist played by Dennis Hopper in the movie. The character, a sycophantic accomplice of Kurtz, revels in the schadenfreude of witnessing the natives literally wallowing in a desolate island of misery.

During the film's much publicized screening at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979, Coppola emphatically stated "My film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam". Yet, the generous usage of such hubristic hyperbole doesn't disguise an alarming fact later pointed out by the Vietnamese-American poet and author, Linh Dinh. Dinh mentions how the solitary native voice in the movie belongs to a Vietnamese army translator who goes on to rebuke a fellow native – "This man is dirty VC (Vietcong). He wants water. He can drink paddy water". The role of Conrad's seminal work in Coppola portraying the natives so bluntly cannot be debated. The novel spoke about Africans with "faces like grotesque masks", while the movie portrayed the aforementioned grotesqueness among the natives.

Thus, one can say that the inherent racism in *Hearts of Darkness* as well as *Apocalypse Now* is as much a result of the racist innuendo – both verbal and visual – as it is of the "peripherality" of the natives with regards to the overall ebb and flow of the stories. The dehumanized portrayal of the natives seldom affords them a place in the story that goes beyond them being anything more than savage, repugnant and abhorrent props. However, the anti-imperialistic lens through which the story is witnessed by everybody except the keenest of readers, has led to the underlying racist travesty being lost on many.

‘Conrad had conceived his Mr Kurtz as a cluster of paradoxes. He is no nonentity but a genius: an outstanding European who might have become a great musician or political leader; but in the jungle, isolated, his talents are corrupted into parodies of themselves (or reduced to essences of themselves)’ (Watts 205)

Watt’s reply to Achebe, defending Conrad, again puts Africa as a Bedlam which triggered Kurtz’s madness while Europe remains a centre of artistic excellence. Watts claims (204) the racist reading to ignore the direction taken by the major ironies as the tale unfolds. The ironies and the author’s intention is not at question. Conrad does not use Irony the same way Shakespeare does when Mark Antony says “But they are all honourable men” only to lift the mask of honour by the end of his speech. The imperial interpretation of the savage is not corrected by Conrad.

The Disney interpretation of Pocahontas calls the Native Americans as savages and then shows the human side of theirs. In the Heart of Darkness, one might understand the cruelty faced but it echoes the cries of an animal activist to the superior mankind. In the end , the Africans still remain at the same inferior position they were at the start of the story. No attempt is made to justify their way of life.

Conrad had the following choices:

1. To delineate the landscape as wild, yet, picturesque and pristine.
2. To present the natives as oppressed, yet, human.

Instead, he painted them in savagery and primitiveness to complement the complexities of his main characters faced and supplement their trials and tribulations.

‘They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from over the sea. All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages.’ (Conrad 80)

Racism is intensified not to show its severity but to add to the psychological turmoil. This usage of racism for his motives is the crime against the author.

Achebe points out that the novel repeats silence and frenzy. (251) Language distinguishes humans from other species. Denying a voice and language to the natives throughout the text further lessens their humanness. No where in the text do we hear human speech from them. Baishya, an Assistant Professor of English at the Ball State University explains that the categories of “voice”, “noise” and “muteness” are connected to the categories of “human,” “animal” and “thing”. The Natives of the story oscillate between producers of noise to victims of muteness, swinging between the animal-like to a non-entity. Thus, Heart of Darkness has silenced Africa.

European culture and its innately domineering outlook towards their east, whether it was Africa, Arabia or the Orient, was virulently racist at the turn of the century. A writer educated in a culture so cockeyed can be naturally excused marginally for the ghastly portrayal of any non-white community. However, the unfortunate usage of words such as grotesque while painting an image of the African man is indeed evidence of an apparent apathy towards racial sentiments on the part of the author. Kurtz’s nihilistic attitude as a result of his close encounter with the natives further extends the gap between the two civilizations. Therefore, I argue that Conrad’s real fault is the widening of the gap between two human races in an attempt to sympathize with one. He has broken up the world into black and white and forgoes any possible linking grey area between them. He eliminated any anthropological or psychological link between the natives and the European traders invoking a sense of poignant pathos without any scope for empathy.

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