

CULTURE, EXPLOITATION AND NATURE IN CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (autobiographical) is based on man's folly. He presents themes of isolation, struggle and fate in his novels. The paper studies how culture, exploitation (of the native savages by the white conquerors) and nature are instrumental for attaining self-identity of Captain Marlow. Man can fall by his own evil designs like Mr. Kurtz (a trader of ivory in Africa) if he is not rational and humane. The paper highlights the dark land, Congo (referred as a dark country situated in central Africa), that is regarded as a metaphor (i.e., the human mind). Heart of Darkness argues that primitive instincts like that of Kurtz are inherited as legacy from Western culture. Conrad uses powerful symbols to justify his message to humankind about the evil within man. Conrad finds both good and evil within humans and for the good and the evil to prevail cultures, surroundings and situations play important roles. The issues addressed in this paper are related to exploitation of both human mind and natural environment.

Keywords: *follies, fate, exploitation, self-identity, primitive instincts, evil, nature.*

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Introduction:

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (an autobiographical novel), published in 1899, can be interpreted in various symbolic perspectives especially postcolonial perspective. It is a novella packed with several critical themes of 19th century. It highlights, for instance, the autobiographical details, social facts, psychological study, imperialism, racism, exploitation, cruelty, exploration of the mind, etc. Conrad presents the novella with minute details of the Western civilization that was already at the brim of degeneration. The Western civilization sees other civilizations of the world as inferior. They look at the inhabitants of developing civilization with much contempt and disgust. The White man feels that it is their responsibility to educate man (especially the inhabitants of Africa continent) which popularly is known as the 'White Man's Burden'. The European countries see immense natural resources that are un-tapped/untouched in African continent. In guise of civilizing/educating the natives and savages of Africa, they wanted to exploit the rich natural resources. To accomplish this prime and selfish motive, they sought to carry out their plan in the name of "burden":

Take up the White Man's burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go send your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild –
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child
Take up the White Man's burden. (Kipling 1+)

The concept of 'White Man's Burden' also brings to mind the slavery system that was practised in most British colonies (especially in African continent). The slavery system introduced by imperial colonizers was considered inhuman and still regarded as an indelible scar in human civilization. Conrad does not believe in captivating humans in any form. He states that all humans deserve to live their life with absolute self-respect.

After the Industrial Revolution (1760 to sometime between 1820 and 1840), new corridors were opened for trade and commerce globally. Voyages (especially dangerous sea travels) and journeys were undertaken to faraway unexplored continents in search of power and wealth. Travelogues by traders and voyagers were handy to provide a sound knowledge about resourceful continents and countries. The period of new spirit and curiosity for distant fairy lands germinated in the minds of people colonialism, racialism (ambiguity and other discrimination), divide and rule policy, etc. Exploitation and degradation of human values in every form was prevalent globally. The White men made every possible attempt to control and rule every object (living and non-living) that is under the sun. To fulfil their unscrupulous desires, the European colonizers took keen interest in colonies outside its geography to elevate the reputation of their respective empire. They achieve their plans they branded their own civilization as supreme and crushed all other civilization. Similarly, the African continent was no exception to the imperial designs of the western countries.

1. Culture :

Heart of Darkness elevates one into the inner-psyche of humans who are in blind race for progress that is of little worth in reality. Culture in *Heart of Darkness* can be divided into two categories: (a). Dark culture as seen represented by the native savages, (b). and Civilized culture as represented by Marlow. In the same way, the novella speaks about two worlds – the powerful and insatiable world represented by the West (European countries) and, the natural and generous world represented by the African and Asian countries (also referred as the third world) in the East. As culture is interrelated to the overall characteristics of particular people or society one should be relatively sensitive to promote it to the world around. In the novella, Conrad has attempted to present before the readers the two cultures – i.e., good and evil. In the story, Mr. Kurtz represents the evil (exploitative) culture and

Captain Marlow represents the good (righteous) culture. Captain Marlow can be considered as a representative of Joseph Conrad's mindset. So, *Heart of Darkness* is enormously a psychological study which raises serious questions about the worth of humans on earth.

The cultural values of the Western world can be highlighted from the character-sketch of Kurtz. The values imbibed by the Western world are reckoned so corrupt that it reduces humans to nothing. The greed for power, materialistic urges and the longing to be absolute master of everything are symbolic of a diminishing culture. In the novella, the dark and dense Congo jungle is symbolic of threat which appears to reclaim its power from man. Likewise, the dark forces of evil like lust and other brutal passions threaten to reclaim the mind and the soul of a civilized man. At one point, even Marlow expresses that if he would have prolonged his stay in the atmosphere of barbarism and savagery, he would also become evil like Kurtz. The writer is of the view that people adhering to dark culture will collapse as the tragic end of Kurtz (tragic death).

On the other hand, the civilized culture represented by Marlow is associated with humanity, rationality and peace. Marlow had taken risk and come all the way to the inner station to take back the sick Kurtz who had slipped away from the ship to rejoin the savages; that is, to save him – not only from sickness, but also from the grasp of the dark and evil forces of the wilderness. He is like an emissary of civilization who has come to take Kurtz back to civilization. Culture is essential for shaping one's personality, for instance the personality of Kurtz and Marlow. Kurtz has let the power of evil overcome him totally. He has almost stopped listening to his good side whereas Marlow resists the temptation of evil, fights it and comes out of it.

Heart of Darkness primarily addresses the subject of Belgian imperialism in the Congo, and the exploitation and cruelty to which the native savages were subjected by the white conquerors. Conrad endeavours to justify the title of the novel stating that *Heart of Darkness* is only about the journey into the heart of the dark continent of Africa, but also into the evil psyche of human heart. The evil psyche of human heart according to Marlow, refers to the corrupting values of his own Western culture which are about to consume Kurtz's soul. They also refer to the primitive instincts which have started to dominate him. The Western traders and travelogues to a great extent tarnished the image of the African continent (which

was termed as the Dark Continent). But Conrad's personal observations regarding the landscape of Africa are totally contradictory. He feels elated by his journey to Africa:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were Kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on. . . And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. (Conrad 60)

A close reading of *Heart of Darkness* states that demeaning of African culture and tradition for accessing to natural and human resource was ruthless. Budding African writers and scholars can reclaim the sanctity and aesthetic function (spirituality) of their culture if they reflect factual information of their landscape and civilization to whole world. Conrad's concept of darkness is linked to a derogatory and basic generalization of a whole continent which Africans know has never been that straightforward and mystifying either. They firmly believe that Conrad is emphasizing myths which are eventually embedded and begin from societies whose relationship with Africa has hardly been based on what is truthful and mutually beneficial. These are societies connected with invasion and subjugation of weak colonies of the world during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. In these two eventful centuries, myths and tradition about Africa reduced/tarnished at every front by the White conquerors. Economically, the inhabitants of the continent were shabbily treated as if they have no life of their own.

2. Exploitation:

Exploitation is another theme of the novella which pervades the novella. When Conrad had visited Congo he saw disturbing scenes of absolute brutality, meanness and cheating. He was disappointed to observe the mind-set (psyche) of the white traders and the authoritative manner in which they treated natives. In the name of exploration and trade, the simple and ignorant natives were exploited. Conrad's descriptive travel diary of Congo is the main source of *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow is just shocked when the whites call the natives

as enemies, rebels and criminals, for no apparent reasons. Marlow observes that on account of their superior technology in the form of guns and cannons, which the natives had never seen, the whites misused their power to treat the natives inhumanly. He simply resists the evil intention/mentality of the Whites:

You know, I hate, detest and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world - what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. (Conrad 49)

The boom of ivory trade and its sale to the European countries also speak volume of nature's exploitation for amassing enormous wealth which is of little worth in reality. In *Heart of Darkness*, ivory trade was much profit oriented business. Kurtz is an ivory trader who establishes his business by captivating the minds of the savages with his godly demeanour. To remain successful in the business, he does not hesitate to kill those who oppose him. It is interesting to observe that when Marlow comes to know that Kurtz talks of the ivory, the station, the river and his fiancée with a sense of ownership, he feels that the question is; to whom does Mr. Kurtz himself belong?: 'What he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. . . He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land' (Conrad 86). The materialistic mindset of Kurtz can be seen in the following statement of Kurtz to Captain Marlow:

This lot of ivory now is really mine. The company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H'm. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do - resist? Eh? I want no more than justice' . . . He wanted no more than justice - no more than justice. (Conrad 133)

Marlow's reflections and observations in the novella are highly philosophical. He considers that the white man's conquest of Africa and its inhabitants is wholly barbaric. Authority and inequality of wealth and power were eternal facts of human society in pre- and post- Colonial Period. The colonial powers were reasonably eager to taste infinite power and wealth for escalating reputation of their civilization i.e. Western civilization. Edward Said remarks about authority and unequal distribution of wealth and power in the following way:

In today's global setting they are also interpretable as having something to do with imperialism. The imperial attitude is beautifully captured in the complicated and rich narrative form of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. (Said 5)

Conrad symbolically clarifies the phases of transformation since pre-colonial period. The pervading darkness within man has constantly grown over time though there were many glorious movements like the Intellectual Revolution (i.e. Pre- and Post Intellectual Revolution including Invention of Printing Press), Industrial Revolution, Demographic Revolution, Scientific Revolution, Happiness Revolution, etc. This view of transformation is remarkable in Marlow's words:

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day . . . Light came out of this river since – you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. (Conrad 11)

Some eminent critics claim that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a satirical literary work. They opine that Conrad chose Captain Marlow to symbolically present his justification of the imperialistic pursuits of the white conquerors and superiority of the Western civilization. Though, the Western world underline *Heart of Darkness* as classic yet it has numerous descriptions that are debatable, twofold, conflicting, and uplifting racial supremacy. The protagonists of Conrad endeavour to represent the flora and fauna as things to be exploited:

We call at some more places with farcical name . . . all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. (Conrad 25-26)

3. Nature:

Nature in *Heart of Darkness* is projected as a neutral agent. But it is the relationship of man with nature that is instrumental for peaceful existence. As Nature does not have a voice of its own to communicate with the modern man it gets invaded regularly. Marlow speaks of

this silent nature/attitude of Nature in the following words: 'And outside, the silent wilderness . . . struck me as something great and invisible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion' (Conrad 41). Thus, the modern man takes advantage of this handicapped situation, chooses to exploit Nature for his materialistic well-being and gradually establishes his self-identity. Marlow explains his feeling of dismissal and locates Nature in Africa to be a 'grimy fragment of another world' (Conrad 124).

The river Congo and the jungle alongside appear to be gloomy and hostile to Marlow's mind which indirectly represents the Enlightenment Age of the Western world. So, the writer Conrad presents in *Heart of Darkness*, a conflict between the Enlightenment Age of the Western civilization and the mysticism of the African civilization. Nature has huge resources of its own which can blind one to misuse the resources for power/money, image and materialistic pursuit. Likewise, the character of Kurtz is also governed by social and environmental forces i.e., nature. He wants to reign nature and its worshippers (in this context the innocent natives/savages) for his evil urges. Like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), any kind of social or moral restraint Kurtz had degenerated into a personification of evil. For his selfish desires he could kill anybody he felt like, without any scruples. His selfishness, cruelty and depravity point to the hollowness of his heart. He is an epitome of European imperialism. Swami Budhananda states in *The Mind and its Control* that:

Opposites sometimes look alike. Two types of persons do not have inner struggle; those who have become unquestioning slaves of their lower nature, and those who have completely mastered their lower nature. All others have inner struggles. (Budhananda 14)

The sun is symbolically depicted by Conrad. Conrad expresses his version of theory regarding the '*blazing African sun*' that scorns the onlookers. When Marlow first visited Congo (the Dark Continent) in a ship, he realizes that the sun blazes ferociously down upon the white beach. The blazing rage of the sun was heightening the divergent dark green of the jungle, 'so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf . . . along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist' (Conrad 24). The sun's rays were neither soothing nor relieving for Marlow. Even the sun's light was not penetrating the dark shade of the jungle that craves for its grandeur. Conrad expresses the ambiguous function of light in the form

the imaginary/symbolised sun. In reality, the sun is an epitome of fertility and progression but in *Heart of Darkness* it is symbolised as incarnation of evil and emptiness (futility). Conrad reckons that everything in Congo reflects negativity and abhorrence.

Nature/Environment is never partial to any living being. But it has always brought out the genuine psyche of man in the absence of the elders, superiors, authority. Hence, the African continent especially Congo is a huge natural place of wealth and resources which elevated Kurtz to the position of powerful ivory trader.

Conclusion:

Heart of Darkness is an account of a human's morality and mental decay and rational journey to recognize the fundamental identity. Conrad affirms that all individuals have evil in them but it is veiled by civilization. The search into the 'Heart of Darkness' (The Dark Continent) becomes a search into the dark recesses of the human heart. This search is externally symbolized by captain Marlow's search for the ivory trader Kurtz. Kurtz, who had come to Africa with the high European ideals of civilizing and enlightening the ignorant natives, himself ends up as a moral degenerate – a monstrous dark deity of the very natives whom he had come to redeem. Marlow and Kurtz can be understood through their relationship with their physical and social surroundings. The characters are shown to be in subordinate relation to their environment. Conrad's work beautifully explains that every human being has some personality of Captain Marlow and Mr. Kurtz i.e., representative of both the good and evil at some point of human life span. It is quite difficult to resist the appalling milieu sometimes. Human psyche, a mysterious entity, can be fully weighed only when one comes in contact with rustic people (as experienced by Captain Marlow and Mr. Kurtz). Friedrich Nietzsche declares that, 'Whether you are strong or weak, the will to power is a unique human attribute, and human genetic attribute. People's desire in power, money, and beauty is the external form of human nature of the will to power in different circumstances' (qtd in "On the Three Themes of *Heart of Darkness*", 117)

The writer tries to showcase the vacuum that is within a modern man and a sophisticated civilization. Conrad tried to highlight his first-hand knowledge and experience regarding the concept of savagery and civilization. The philosophical observation by Marlow

expresses the idea that, what we see in this world is like a dream – that is, it is not the whole truth and moreover, man is actually alone though he lives in society. Marlow says that, ‘We live, as we dream – alone’ (Conrad 50). Hence, our thinking and belief system should be grounded so as to exist peacefully in a civilized environment (an environment of ‘reason’, ‘humanity’, ‘compassion’, ‘values’, ‘ethics’ etc.

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