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SUBALTERNS AND MARGINALISED AFRICAN ORIENTALS IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*: A POST-COLONIAL VIEW

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Abstract

While portraying the oriental indigenous people and their representative culture in a work of art like Heart of Darkness by the occidental narrator from the white, European, and patriarchal perspective for his intended reader in colonial times and the intentions and purpose of presentation pictures differ. For the reading of the novella by the post-colonial reader the representation is likely to be outdated if done only from the colonial and imperialistic point of view. The need is to keep the multi-layered and polyphony of voices kind of approach while depicting, showing and telling the pan-African image and culture. The representation should make the indigenous subject rather than the object of the presentation in the narrated tale in post-colonial times. The subjugation and marginalization of the Indigenised African occident at the hand of the colonial narrator need interrogation for the writing back to empire in post-colonial times. Historical evidence in the form of artistic presentation in this work of literature curtails the image of the Orient at the hand of the occident. To bring home the moral of the story should ideally have better prospects and futuristic agenda relevant to contemporary times. The novella however apt for colonial times would fail in the test of time if it does not involve and signify something relevant to the upcoming times. So, what would be fair in colonial times becomes foul in today's times and not the other way round, that is, which was foul in colonial times becomes fair in contemporary times. In this litmus test of current trends and in the evaluative stage, the novella fails to arouse the interest of the post-colonial reader and is therefore hard to digest on tests of contemporary times.

Key Words: Subaltern, Marginalised, Orient, Occident, Colonial, Post-colonial, Cultural representation.

SUBALTERNS AND MARGINALISED AFRICAN ORIENTALS IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*: A POST-COLONIAL VIEW

- Pandurang Bhagwan Daphal

'Heart of Darkness' is a well-known 1899 novella by Joseph Conrad, a Polish-British writer. This novel is well known for its depiction and narration of the colonial life of Belgium's imperial company in the river of Congo, the Central African River. Marlow, the protagonist of the story and the narrator goes on a journey in this central river to bring back the ivory trader from the central part of the river named Mr. Kurtz. The novella is an inward journey of the protagonist and his failure in bringing back Kurtz as he dies while getting back home which is Europe. The last words of Mr. Kurtz were, 'The horror! The horror!' (Conrad. P. 115) becomes the name of the intended when Marlow pulls himself up for the occasion of meeting her. The novella ends with this lie on the part of the narrator revealing the darkness of the heart of men.

At the beginning of the story, Marlow, one of the five people that includes: himself, the Director of the Company (The Pilot and river-boat Captain), the Lawyer, the Accountant and the Writer (the first-person narrator), is waiting for the turn of the tide in the riverboat *Nellie* in the river Thames in the United Kingdom. This itself is an occidental background against which an Oriental tale is narrated in which Mr. Kurtz an occidental persona is worshipped as God by the Indians of the African continent where he rules on them and sends ivory to the European master or imperialist. The exploitation of the Indigenised people at the hands of Mr. Kurtz subjugates them. This becomes a horrific tale of colony rule where Indigenised people are crushed to undignified human conditions by their own follies and also by the purpose of civilizing them by the white communities as depicted in the novella.

'The white man's burden' (a term originally coined by Rudyard Kipling for his poem of the same title) of civilising the colonies by making them imitate them fails because the coloniser while asking for mimicry does not want to sacrifice his way of looking into the world. Thus, mimicry does not become hybridity and filiation does not give way to

affiliated societies as narrated by Marlow in this tale of the African Continent. While narrating about the inhuman conditions, the narrator is not able to arouse empathy on the part of his European reader and listener of this wonderful tale. So also, they never question his tale even if it were about a lie told to the intended of the central character in the story. They rather think about him in positive terms like 'Buddha' towards the end of the story. As Joseph Conrad puts through Marlow's narration:

"They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. 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. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . ." (Conrad. P. 9)

However, the subalterns in the novella suffer at the hands of the occidental. The company for whom they work crush them to inhuman conditions as while making the railways track by the indigenised, they are chained and are slaves to their occidental masters. The indigenous people become the object of Marlow's narration rather than the subject of his tale. This makes them marginalised as these subaltern voices are not heard in the novella. Their follies at the hand of their master and a tale for pleasure on them by the occidental narrators makes them vulnerable at the cost of humanity. Today it would be an act of atrocious behaviour on the part of the master and need to be condemned by the contemporary reader of the novella. This is how Marlow narrates the indigenous people in the novel:

"A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round

their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meagre 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. PP. 23-24)

The indigenous characters in the novella are not marginalised being African by themselves. It is the comparison and the superiority of the race as indicated in the novella of the white community that makes them look down upon themselves and makes them the object of the occidental tale. On the other hand, this is how Marlow narrates the White:

"Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on the path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity. This was simple prudence, white men being so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be. He was speedily reassured, and with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings." (Conrad. P. 24)

The self-praise of everything that is European and hate for the outside—indigenous native population—that is, depicted about the African Congo skeleton-like people living at the Central and Inner station on the river navigates a kind of mentality that leads to further subjugation of the indigenous people in the novella. This objectification of the Indigenised at the hand of Western, European, White, Occidental and Patriarchal Master's norms makes them marginalised in the context of the work of art as Edward said says in *Two Vision* in the novella in his famous book *'Culture and Imperialism'* (1993) pp 22-31.

“Conrad could probably never- have used Marlow to present anything other than an imperialist world-view, given what was available for either Conrad or Marlow to see of the non-European at the time. Independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West. True, Conrad scrupulously recorded the differences between the disgraces of Belgian and British colonial attitudes, but he could only imagine the world carved up into one or another Western sphere of dominion. But because Conrad also had an extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality, he quite carefully (some would say maddeningly) qualified Marlow's narrative with the provisionality that came from standing at the very juncture of this world with another, unspecified but different.” (Said P. 23)

The aesthetic and political sense of Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* has given rise to many critical views on the novella. Not only does the masterful classical narration fails at the test of Said as pointed out above but it brings out the follies of the whole imperialistic colonial African project of the occidentals. The theme of darkness of heart is shown by the masterly classical narration in English manner by the narrator. The omnipresent narration of the writer or the second person narration of Marlow both narrated the Indigenous people in stark-dark reality. It is not just the tragedy of Kurtz but of exploitation of the pan-African culture at the hand of the European master narrator who seems to enjoy the tale of mutely depicted Indigenised people.

The hegemony of the two narrative voices through their narration of the silently shown indigenous people adds further to make them lose control over their own resources and the loss for them is both in the field of political and poetic justice. Their subjugation not only marginalises them and makes them subalterns in their own land but the publication of the novella for its intended reader across the globe makes them vulnerable as they are muted but represented like a person shown in the painting in real times. This showing and narrating about the Indigenised happen at the back of the civilising mission of the narrator's philanthropic mission and for the purpose of entertaining themselves on the pan-African culture is condemnable and participation of the indigenous voice will be laudable in the context of the post-colonial era.

As Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, the famous critic had said that the subalterns cannot speak in her famous essay, 'Can the subalterns speak?' So, they are muted in this tale too.

"It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. . ." (Spivak. P. 28)

As Spivak mentioned in the conclusion of the essay, this mutation on the part of the master narrator whether by the writer or the narrator makes the marginalization of the whole African, indigenised population against their knowledge, will and wish. It is not until 'the empire writes back to the centre...' (Bill. Opening Page) as Salman Rushdie has rightly pointed out that such subalternity can be avoided or unmuted for the better future of the indigenised people. Attempts at such emancipation are a must and give hope to budding generations in the post-colonial era.

In short, in the litmus test of narrating the truth for the post-colonial reader, the story fails as it does not allow Indigenised voices their speech and so also one starts to lose interest when seen from the marginalised subaltern African oriental perspective.

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