



Imperialism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract— This paper deals with an important as well as a controversial novel the *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. Conrad had suffered in his early lifetime from the imperialism of Russia to Ukraine his native homeland. Thus, the novel is an outcome of the collaboration of different life experiences especially his journey to the Congo. He developed a disease from Africa which forced him to stay home for some time, so he started writing and became one of the modern novelists. The *Heart of Darkness* is the most important of Joseph Conrad's novels as he commented before the Congo he was just a mere animal. The novel reflects Conrad's long journey into the self. This paper also explains how Conrad was accused of being an imperialist and a racist due to different factors which were discussed in this study. Some critics defended Conrad but others criticized his schemes of dealing with the topic of colonialism, severely.



Keywords— racist, colonization, loot, Ivory, Congo.

I. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness* brought him a lot of criticism, for he was accused of being an imperialist, then a racist. The imperialistic spirit sprung from the notion that the European countries thought that they are the first race found. The development of industrialism and the discoveries of the steam engine, navigation, printing, and weapons, enabled Europe to supersede the other countries in various technological advances. The church played an important role in spreading the spirit of colonialism planting the seed of missionaries, this in addition to the greed and the need for resources like ivory, rubber, and gold.

Conrad's spirit of imperialism came from his own visit to the Belgium-Congo Free State, and the personal experience of this dark country. Marlow's thoughts and reactions towards the Congolese might be a reflection of Conrad's own experience there. From the very beginning of the novel Marlow preludes his narration with a reference to the Roman conquest to Britain. Marlow commented on the brutality of the Romans in Britain comparing it to the violations, robbery and violence of the European conquerors in Africa. According to Marlow

conquering other countries with different complexion, color and race would always involve murder.

Marlow believed that there is only one excuse to colonialism that is, doing some constructive work in the underdeveloped countries. "Colonialism's representations, reading practices, attitudes and values are not so easily dislodged" (McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* 33) The Europeans and most of the white-men claim that they have a certain duty towards the underdeveloped countries which they dominate. The Europeans legislated Imperialism by the idea of civilizing the native Africans, their media spread the propaganda of such lies.

II. THE SOURCE OF THE NOVEL

Joseph Conrad is an English writer of a Polish origin. He is one of the outstanding and appreciated novelists of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. His novels mainly introduce themes of non-European setting for the English readers. Conrad is classified as a modern novelist though he lived and wrote in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. His innovative narrative style and the anti-heroic characters had been of great influence on the twentieth century writers. Conrad witnessed the climax of

the British Empire, and his work in the French and English Navy had a great influence on his novels. His novels are considered a clear realistic manifestation of the European colonizing spirit in Africa.

Conrad was born in the mid-nineteenth century in Ukraine which was under the rule of the Russian Empire, and once been under the domination of the Kingdom of Poland. Conrad worked in the Navy in a young age. His decision to leave his own country and live in England had made him vulnerable and with a sense of uncertainty. Critics say that Conrad had cut himself from Poland forever.

Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness* took place in Belgian-Congo Free State. The history of this country is rather violent and bloody one. King Leopold II named the Congo as The Belgian-Congo Free State and the country became as his personal property. His rule was marked with all kinds of violence and brutality practiced on the native Congolese. The colonization had become a brutal control over people and their lands. "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with hiding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content" (Fanon, 1963, p. 37).

The colonization of the King to the Congo, which was 76 times larger than Belgium, came under the excuse of civilizing the barbaric Congolese. History proved the opposite the Europeans brought nothing but torcher, slavery, murder and robbery of the colonized Africa. King Leopold II exploited the natural resources of the Congo like ivory, rubber and jewels for his personal enrichment. More than half of the population died because of the inhumane treatment of colonizers to the Congolese. The native people were beheaded, tortured, starved, overworked, or even lamed by cutting their hands or feet.

When King Leopold II controlled the Congo as his personal property, he said that he would educate and help the Congo to become a better place. Time proved the opposite he denied the Congolese their lawful rights in their lands and crops, everything became part of the king's property. The king built an army of mercenaries from other parts of Africa, and they were armed with modern weapons to terrify, torcher and kill the natives. They massacred families, tortured hostages, and burned entire villages. The Congo Free State became one of the worst international scandals of the twentieth century. One of the soldiers testified that they would obey the commands of officers to cut off the heads of protesting Congolese and they would hang them on the village palisades and to hang the women and children on the palisades in the form of a cross. They also testified that they might shorten their service time if they collected plenty of hands. A basket of cut hands under the feet of Europeans had become a

symbol of the Congo Free State. The mercenaries and soldiers competed on bringing more hands. There became a harvesting of hands instead of harvesting of rubber and Ivory.

Many Europeans stood against the violations and deliberate brutality that the King's mercenaries practiced on the Congo people. In 1908 international demands forced King Leopold II to return the Congo to the property of Belgium. The Congo remained colonized until 1960, when it was liberated and became Independent.

III. WHAT IS IMPERIALISM

Imperialism can be used to spread one's own language and culture. In anthropology, ethics, and sociology, this ideology is defined as cultural imperialism. France and the United Kingdom are prime "examples of cultural imperialism" (Talukder).

Joseph Conrad is accused of being an Imperialist in his novel *Heart of Darkness*. Imperialism can be defined as the policy the practice and the territorial domination of the strong countries over the policies and economies or even the lands of other countries. The control over the world markets is another type of imperialism. Mainly Imperialism might refer to the conquering of the underdeveloped countries; it might also mean the control of policies and economics of weaker countries.

Another form of Imperialism is that of language, native people are forced to the language of the invaders and conquerors. Imperialism is usually achieved through the use of military powers. The modern meaning of the term Imperialism is the domination over economy, language and culture. So, in this sense Imperialism could have two forms formal and informal. Colonization is one type of formal imperialism where the powerful country would use military forces to dominate and exploit the resources of other weaker countries, it is also called territorial colonization.

According to Edward Said, there is a difference between colonization and imperialism. Imperialism according to Said is "the practice, the theory and the attitude of dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory. While colonialism involves implanting of settlements on a distant territory. Colonialism and the race to control the world is one of the reasons behind the outbreak of the First World War.

In the nineteenth century Imperialism became one of the important themes in the English novel. Kim by Rudyard Kipling represents the Imperialism of Britain over the India. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is another example of Imperialistic terror of Europe in Africa. The

novel was first published in 1902, and it won both approval and rejection. Chinua's famous critique in 1977 accused Conrad of being a racist. Said on the other hand defended Conrad's novel, being a true representation of the Belgium colonizing Africa.

Conrad was accused of racism for his presentation of non-European characters in his novels. The Nigerian critic and writer Chinua accused Conrad for being a "bloody racist" and he demanded that the novel of *The Heart of Darkness* should be denounced of its importance.

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thorough going racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked (Achebe 176).

Achebe commented in the "Times Literary Supplement" "in Conrad's novella the humanity of Africans was totally undermined by the mindless of its context and the pretty explicit animal imagery surrounding it" (Achebe 176)

The Indian critic Frances B. Singh wrote an article entitled "the Colonialist Bias of *Heart of Darkness*" she declared that Conrad had made it clear that the evil implied in the title directly refers to the Africans, their customs and their rituals. He, as the critic implies, associated deprivation and poverty with black people. One cannot ignore these accusations, but they might give a different perspective to Conrad's novel.

Achebe criticizes Conrad for dehumanizing Africans depriving them from any role or speech or even any identity in his novels. Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" on the other hand, is a novel that deals with the British occupation on Ibo. In his novel Achebe presented a detailed account of the lives of the Africans.

IV. MARLOW AS A PROTOTYPE

The Heart of Darkness is a novel about Marlow the main character as well as the narrator in the novel. He has a special assignment to sail to the Congo in order to retrieve an Ivory trader named Mr. Kurtz. Marlow discovers that Mr. Kurtz has changed himself into a demi-god figure to the natives. He used extensive measures to collect huge amounts of Ivory. Kurtz refuses to return to the civilized world, and in an attempt to delay Marlow's mission he burns the steamboat. Few months later Marlow's

Steamboat is rebuilt and he takes Mr. Kurtz, who appears very sickly, back home and he dies in the way back screaming "the horror, the horror". (Conrad 69) Marlow returns to England empty handed, he makes a visit to Kurtz intended and delivers a letter from Kurtz. She remarks that Mr. Kurtz was a great man and asked about Kurtz last words. Marlow tells her that they were her name.

The Heart of Darkness won a lot of criticism throughout time. Some critics classified the novel as anti-colonialism and against expansion or even anti-imperialistic. Others might reduce *The Heart of Darkness* into a mere adventure story, which ends with a woman idealizing Mr. Kurtz. While others might argue that Conrad's novel is more than mere presentation of adventure, it offers a characterization of the human mind. Edward Garnet brings the idea of race to the novel; he explains that the novel brings out the theme of white man's behavior in the far away colonies and how his set of morals retreats. The race towards money and exploitation of the natives is obvious in the novel, thus the novel is about the demoralizations of Europeans in Africa.

Conrad had written that the novel is about "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa." (Murfin, 100)

Very early criticism ignored the race aspect; it is somehow difficult to set a definition for the word 'racism' because it seems to change overtime. The term racism did not exist at the time Conrad wrote the novel. The term 'race' was considered as something normal so the word 'racism' was not common or even used.

The first time the term came into use was in 1907, the term can be defined as "the belief in the superiority of a particular race leading to prejudice and antagonism towards people of other races, especially those in close proximity who may be felt as a threat to one's culture and racial integrity or economic well-being" (Firchow, 234)

It was after ten years after his death that the term became commonly used. Said 1993, wrote about race in *The Heart of Darkness*. Said defended Europeans for having to be racist. He reduced the effect of the imperialistic spirit of the Europeans saying that imperialism is an interdependent work. He goes on further to add that the world is a global environment and the racial hatred might lead to disasters. Said explains that it would be impossible to present truthfully the life sensations of others, he explains that "we live, as we dream alone." (Said, 23)

As Marlow is the narrator, he gives the sensation that there is no escape from European imperialism. The novel is limited to Marlow's point of view and he reflected the imperialistic view of the story. The general notion, that went on at that time, was that the Europeans and the white

people should be independent and free, they should rule the less who are to become the subjects. Even science and learning were always limited to the west.

Conrad's narrative was limited to his period of time, so in the *Heart of Darkness* there is no other solution to Imperialism, but history proved the opposite. He painted a realistic picture of how Africa was during the colonization of Europeans. To Said the novel is a time document of what happened in Africa at the time of European colonization, for whatever happened in Africa seemed normal and correct at that time. Marlow showed the Orthodoxic intentions of imperialism and what happened in reality there. He also proved that nothing was as they seemed to be from outside. According to Conrad Darkness could prevail in both London as well as Africa. Darkness could be enlightened by the civilization of the west. Although Conrad presented Colonization as mere exploitation of the lands and countries, according to Said, Conrad believes that the darkness should be enlightened by European colonization. Although Conrad never gave a solution or an end to imperialism, therefore, Conrad is considered a racist by today's terms and laws.

Achebes argues that Conrad discriminated between people according to their color, he presented white people as cultivated and civilized while the black Africans are brutal, rough, underdeveloped, and dangerous. Conrad clearly described the forest in Africa as dark green almost black. The beauty of Africa is described with a sense of evil and danger. The darkness could also imply the darkness of European souls as they butchered and tortured the native Africans to steal their native wealth. The Europeans became like demi-god figures who tend to do whatever they want with the natives without being punished. The Europeans' conquest was to take over other people's countries with different complexion or even different culture than themselves. So, the term is no different from the context of robbery and murder.

The Heart of Darkness is filled with imperialistic implications; even characters might present the imperialistic temper of the novel. Marlow the main character and the narrator share some traits with Conrad, for both spent significant time of their lives sailing in Africa. Marlow is presented as a sensitive anti-colonial thinker; he would feel disgusted from the brutality of the white-man's machinery exploiting the native Congolese. He might show some sympathy on various occasions like when the general manager started beating the young black boy accusing him of burning the sheds. He might feel terrified at how the colonizers lost their souls in the dark forest of the Congo. The drastic scene of the station of the sick slaves, and the heads of the Congolese hanging on

poles surrounding Kurtz dwelling shocked Marlow at how the White-men colonizers had deviated from their claimed mission of helping and civilizing the natives.

Marlow never takes action or even dares to say a word to show his discontent with their schemes of managing the colonies. He might be convinced that it is the white-man's right to rule and dominate over people of colored skin, because they are not human-beings, by this he is as imperialist as Kurtz might be.

Mr. Kurtz is a true representative of imperialistic characters in *The Heart of Darkness*. Marlow as well as the readers only hear of him and his own eccentric methods of collecting ivory at the beginning of the novel. He only meets him at the very verge of his death. Kurtz is a controversial character, his influence on Marlow is very powerful. He shapes himself into the form of a tyrannical god for the natives. He started his journey as an adventurer with a mission of improving, humanizing and civilizing the natives, as he explained in his report to the company.

Kurtz uses mysterious methods for collecting Ivory, he was a man who had absolute power, which led him to demand warship from the natives. Kurtz is a true and realistic representation of the white-man enterprise in the colonized countries. He is criticized by the General Manager because he seems to show the reality of his intentions in opposite to the other members of the Company, who tend to disguise under the good intentions of colonialism. Marlow commented that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz". Kurtz is a stereotype of greed and lust being let loose. He embodies the Company's policies, but without minding for his reputation as other might do. The General Manager might call him morally "sick", but Kurtz replies that it is the natural spirit of colonialism and imperialism of Europeans that should be incriminated, Kurtz said "Not so sick as you'd like to believe." Kurt before being corrupted by power, he was a true and good representative of the European civilization. He was described as having noble intentions of civilizing the natives in Africa. His time in Africa transformed him into a criminal, a monster who makes himself a god for the natives to worship. This proved that within all the morals he had, he was empty from the inside. Kurtz embodied Europe while the General Manager, another imperialistic character, represented the Company the only thing the General Manager cared about was his position in the Company and the Ivory they collected. We see the sense of imperialism in Marlow's Aunt for she was a woman with powerful connections she is good representative of the false claims of colonization, she believed that the white-men had a divine mission of cultivating the savages.

Conrad drew the character of Kurtz to embody the failure of colonialism in Africa. He pictures the inner darkness of the "whited sepulture" of the European Imperialism. Kurtz came to Africa with a mission that is to "wean those ignorant millions from their horrid way." Marlow's journey in the novel stands for the journey to explore the hidden self and man's capacity towards evil. Thus, the novel is not a mere psychological representation but also moral conflict between good and evil.

Conrad criticized Marlow's responsibility rewords the knowledge he acquired in the Congo. Marlow realized that Kurtz had lowered himself into the depth of evil, this evil can exist in the heart of men. Colonialism is sustained, and maybe even propelled, by remarkable ideological constructions that include conceptions in that particular territory where people feeling inferior deserve and request dominance. Functioning with the aim off instilling Western ideology, terms and notions like inferiority, subaltern, subordinate people, dependence, servants, and ruling class are common in the language of classical nineteenth-century imperialist culture. Thus, cultural conceptions are clarified, affirmed, questioned, or rejected as a result of colonial experiences (Said Culture and Imperialism 9).

V. CONCLUSION

Imperialism is a central theme in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." The novella explores the effects of imperialism and colonialism on Africa and its people. As soon as the protagonist, Marlow, arrives in Africa, he witnesses the devastation caused by imperialism and colonialism. The book offers a harsh picture of colonial enterprise, with scenes of torture, cruelty, and near-slavery. Greed and power are the primary reasons behind imperialism, and Kurtz, the ivory trader, represents the darkness of imperialism by placing himself as a god among the people of the Congo and using them to do his labor for him. The novel reveals the most violating loot that the history of humanity had ever witnessed. The novel is considered as an angry document dealing with the violent and brutal exploitation of Europeans to the Congo. Marlow the narrator of the novel explains that the Europeans act as superior to the Africans who are savages and primitive. Conrad presented the idea of racism by presenting the crimes done by the colonizers.

The novel is a clear representation of the racism practiced by the colonization of Africa, whereas the white men used all kind of power to make them yield and bow to them acting as a superior race. The Europeans throughout their unhumanitarian treatment tried to reduce the native Africans into mere animals.

Marlow is shocked at the scene of the French ship shelling a village in the jungle, the outrageous treatment where the slaves are thrown in a grove starving and sick waiting for their death but he never does or says a thing as if it was the white-men's rights to do so. The *Heart of Darkness* is a record of the things done and seen, where the lies of the looters were uncovered by the novel. According to Conrad the most dangerous kind of deception is self-deception. Kurtz is a good example of a man losing himself as the general report stated that "Kurtz could get himself to believe anything- anything".

The Congo experience had changed Conrad from being a sailor into being a writer, because he saw human weakness, baseness, and greed which changed his youthful hopes into an immense darkness. The novel is perceived by many critics as the conflict between white and black.

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