HEART OF DARKNESS: JOSEPH CONRAD’S ANTI-IMPERIALISTIC PERSPECTIVE THROUGH RACISM, PESSIMISM AND IMPRESSIONISM

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ABSTRACT

Imperialism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is one of the chief focal aspects of critical controversy and debate in the fields of literary theory and literary criticism. The aim of the study is to examine the ideological background to viewing Conrad as anti-imperialist in ‘Heart of Darkness’, while dealing also with the presentation of imperialism and racism. The study reveals that Conrad was consciously anti-imperialist but he unconsciously or carelessly employed racist terminology.

The novel is a moving record of White imperialism in the Belgian Congo and of the intense suffering of the Africans. It conveys Conrad’s nihilistic impression of the Whites who exercised unpardonable authority over natives. As Conrad sets up Africa as a foil to Europe and a place of negation and cannibalism, many contemporary critics viewed the text as a racist work. But in writing about the diabolical practice of White imperialism in Africa, can Conrad be seen as an extremist in terms of racism? Does he support the dehumanization of natives which is practiced by the Whites in the name of a civilizing role? The study scrupulously examines these controversial elements in the text and concludes that Conrad’s impressionistic narrative technique, incorporating a pessimistic viewpoint, along with his disillusioned emotions over what seems to be White cannibalism in the Congo, and the excessively grim nature of the novel Heart of Darkness, all serve Conrad’s anti-imperialistic perspective effectively. Conrad’s anti-imperialistic ideology employed in Heart of Darkness provides then a tremendous attack on inhuman, brutalized White imperialism. The absence of joys, success and optimism that strengthen the impression of extreme negation throughout the novel is evidence of Conrad’s deeply anti-imperialistic perspective.

KEYWORDS: Heart of Darkness, imperialism, racism, pessimism.
INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

As the British Empire became the great empire upon which the sun never set, the contemporary issues of the far flung lands under Queen Victoria’s dominion inspired writers and poets create tales of adventure in the name of Crown and country. These forms of fiction and poetry readily owned a unique genre of Scientific Romance Literature with its own archetypes and stereotypes. This was Imperialist Adventure.

From the perspective of Imperialist Adventure, the novelist Joseph Conrad can be considered as a world recognized writer drawing the attention of the readers into controversial aspects of imperialism that took place in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. This period in the study of imperialism marks a crucial development in Conrad’s experience and outlook. He started to see colonialism closer up. With this sentiment, his works trace the distinctive moment of this imperialist situation from the loosely administered, ad hoc arrangement in Malaya, to the intensified scramble for land in Africa, to the financial, dependencies established in South America.

Profound studies of Conrad’s fiction, Heart of Darkness could be highly deemed for its complexity, contradictory notions being a tale full of paradoxes. It is a well-known fact in the Imperialist Adventure genre of literature that Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is strongly attacked as a racist text. But the novella has manifold themes including pessimism, moral nihilism, and hypocrisy of imperialism that can be even used to deny this common belief. Thus my interest on these complexities in Heart of Darkness immensely increased in terms of examining to what extent we can find evidence to deny the common misinterpretation of deeming Conrad as a racist.

Being a Sri Lankan, I was deeply touched when I first read Heart of Darkness because Sri Lanka too was once a victim of European colonialism; the effects of this are haunting us even today though it had come to an end. The tremendous physical and mental torture inflicted on native Africans by imperialists moved me to recollect the historical records of the negative experience of Sri Lankans under Portuguese, Dutch and British imperialist rules. Thus my objective of this literary study is to reconsider the past agony of African natives through eyes of the imperialist Belgium and to promote racial harmony, kindness and love towards each human being irrespective of race, language and other differences.

The methodology of the study is based on content analysis of the text while identifying views of critics in relation to racism and imperialism.

JOSEPH CONRAD AND HEART OF DARKNESS

Surprised though the Polish-born ‘Joseph Conrad’ may have been to become a published English author in 1985 at the age of thirty seven, it should come as no surprise, because the extraordinary varied and cosmopolitan influences at work on him made him the novelist of paradox and riddle. Being Polish, he started his career as a sailor in French ships, but the year 1878 marks yet
another sharp change in his life since it signals the moment to stop serving in French ships when Conrad made his first contact with the British Merchant Service and would soon come to seek the English identity in its traditions. Conrad’s passage into English life, still a momentous event, has a history to recount in detail. His later autobiographies tend to glamorize and mythologize his entry into English life as a case of instant adoption by the country and its language as of a fellow spirit.

Joys of life and triumphs of men in the world are seldom addressed by Conrad whose general trend of thinking is pessimistic; thereby, almost all of his novels and stories lay stress on human suffering and mystery of fate. Conrad’s first two novels are Almayer’s Folly and An Outcast of the Islands. The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ (1897) represents an important landmark at the beginning of Conrad’s major phase. The major fruits of the years from 1898-1902 what Conrad would come to call his ‘Blackwood’s’ period represents another important stage in his struggle to negotiate with his English cultural identity and audience. These years are linked with the emergence of his famous narrator Marlow, who would determine the experimental nature of his three turn-of-the-century works, ‘Youth’, ‘Heart of Darkness’ and ‘Lord Jim’. (Stape, ‘Joseph Conrad’ p.13)

A crucial turning point in his later sea career was a traumatic visit to the Belgian Congo in 1890 which later inspired Conrad to write a moving record of his own experience of Whites who exercised their authority over natives in Congo and his impressions of the African savages. By the time of Conrad’s visit to Congo, it was under the rule of Belgian king Leopold II which was established in the name of civilizing native Africans but mainly to gather ivory. Ivory was the chief commodity which the agents of the Belgian trading companies collected on behalf of their employers. Conrad himself worked only as the captain of a steam-boat and didn’t participate in any trading activity. But Conrad got the opportunity to study the kind of life which the savages were leading under this imperialistic rule. During this period, Conrad noted evidence of atrocities, exploitation, inefficiency and hypocrisy, and it fully convinced him of the disparity between imperialism’s rhetoric and the harsh reality of ‘the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of conscience’ (ibid: p.48)

Heart of Darkness is a story of a journey into ‘darkest Africa’. Max Nordan (author of Degeneration) claimed that civilization was being corrupted by the influence of people who were morally degenerate, and his account of the ‘highly-gifted degenerate’, the charismatic yet depraved genius, may have influenced Conrad’s depiction of Mr. Kurtz. (Watts, Cedric, Heart of Darkness: p.46)

The demonic figure Mr. Kurtz, a White, is the central character in the novel who leads a primitive life style in Africa while practicing cannibalism on poor natives in the role of civilizing the natives. He is further described as one who is ‘hollow at the core’ having an immense lust for ivory and finally dies saying “horror, horror”.

**RACIST TERMINOLOGY EMPLOYED IN HEART OF DARKNESS**

The critical postcolonial approach to ‘Heart of Darkness’ as a racist text was first pointed out by the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe in a lecture at the university of Massachusetts in 1995.
Achebe’s point of view, “…Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization” (Achebe:783). It is countered by the contention of Ezekiel Mphahlele, South African writer, that Conrad was one of the few ‘outstanding White novelists who portray competently characters belonging to cultural groups outside their own’ (The African Image:p.125). Yet another opposite notion comes from D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, a Sri Lankan critic, placing Conrad with ‘a distinguished minority of radical contemporary critics of imperialism such as Mark Twain, Roger Casement and E.D. Morel (Developing Countries:p.1). These critics had reasons to have their own beliefs to view Conrad’s vision in Heart of Darkness as to state whether he is a racist or anti-imperialist. In referring to these controversial statements, it is noteworthy to measure first the evidence supporting Conrad’s racist attitudes.

**CONRAD’S STRESS ON CANNIBALISM OF AFRICANS**

There is one incident in the novel in which during the attack by the tribesmen on the ship sailing to the Congo, the helmsman, a Black, was injured by a spear and fell dead. When Marlow (the narrator) dropped the dead body into the river, black members of the ship’s crew felt unhappy because they would have liked to have eaten the human flesh of the helmsman.

Conrad’s emphasis on cannibalism and barbarism of Africans goes to the extent of dehumanizing even the civilized Whites. In Marlow’s medical examination prior to his journey to Africa, the doctor’s peculiar statement over the psyche of Europeans entering Africa prompts further investigation. Why is the doctor interested in knowing the psychological changes taking place in Whites who go into the heart of the dark continent? Why does he say so? Later on, Marlow comes to know about Mr. Kurtz, a White man who is living like a barbarian in Congo. How does a White man, the so-called civilized one become a diabolical character? Conrad reveals that it is the reason of Kurtz’s prolonged stay in Congo implying what the environment of savagery and primitivism can do even to the highly developed mind of a Western man. This notion in the novel is supported by the first British governor in Central Africa, Sir. Harry H. Johnston;

I have been increasingly struck with the rapidity with which such members of the White race as are not of the best class, can throw over the restraints of civilization and develop into savages of unbridled lust and abominable cruelty (Whitfield, 2006)

In this light Achebe is right to call Conrad’s portrayal of Africans as racist. His version of evil—the form taken by Kurtz’s satanic behavior is ‘going native’. In other words, evil is African in Conrad’s story; if it is also European that’s because some White men in the heart of darkness behave like Africans.

**MARLOW’S EMOTIONS OVER THE JOURNEY TO AFRICA**

Marlow’s emotions over the journey to Africa and its natives confirm the wildest fantasies and myths of Africans and the superior status of Whites. The journey to Congo seemed to Marlow that his steamer was sailing deeper into the heart of darkness. He watched the coast as the steamer sailed onwards.
We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of the black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, pray to us welcoming us. Who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wandering secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse… (*Heart of Darkness*, p.52)

Emphasizing Marlow’s emotions in this journey, Conrad creates the image as if Marlow is travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world, when vegetation grew on the earth in great abundance, and when the big trees were the kings of the jungle. The forests on both sides of the Congo river were so thick as to be impenetrable.

Yet another issue supporting Conrad’s racism is the absence of African voice in the novel. An implicit nature of characterization of the native Africans extends as to describe them as ‘faceless, ugly, rudimentary souls’. The African characters are present as absent figures. They do not speak or think. They do not behave like normal human beings. Whenever they are given any kind of presence, it is only as foils for another European character as when the African woman who was the savage is allowed speech at all, it was ‘a violent babble of uncouth sounds’.

Furthermore, *Heart of Darkness* makes negative statements about Africans referring to them as ‘nigger’, ‘savages’, ‘prehistoric man’. They are described as generally miserable and unhealthy, far from friends, family and familiar food and comforting beliefs. In the novel, Marlow tries to dramatize this aspect of colonial brutality to his listeners by describing his overland tramp to the company’s Central Station on the Congo; he reports ‘a solitude, nobody, not a hut’:

The population had cleared out a long time ago. Well, if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal and Gravesend, catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon. (*Heart of Darkness*, p.160)

Thus, ‘*Heart of Darkness*’ prompts a lot of discussions and harsh criticisms with regard to racism because this aspect is very often controversial as some critics view it as racist and others view it as anti-imperialist.

**ANTI-IMPERIALISM IN HEART OF DARKNESS**

Switching the focus from racist terminology to the anti-imperialistic vision used by Conrad, it is imperative to notice the great pains taken by the writer to distance himself from and ‘set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral-universe of his story’ through the framework of a ‘narrator behind the narrator’(Marlow being the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*)

Through his actual experience of the Congo region, he saw the actual conditions of colonized and colonizer. They struck him as neither grand nor progressive but as absurd. The image of ‘the White man in the tropics’ described in official pronouncements and in the day’s abundant travel writing and adventure fiction was not to be found. Instead of the efficient, benevolent bearers of
civilization’s torch, he saw men cut off from and nostalgic for Europe, and drunk on power, their presumed racial superiority, and alcohol. (Najder, Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle, p.99)

At the very outset of Marlow’s narration, his referring to the ancient Roman conquest of Britain draws light on Conrad’s disapproval of any kind of invasion. The ancient Romans, says Marlow, grabbed what they could get. Their conquest of Britain was “robbery with violence”.

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. (Heart of Darkness, p.9)

Through Marlow’s narration, Conrad doesn’t try to justify or support White imperialism but stresses such a conquest is unpardonable.

Conrad’s continuous emphasis on imperialist greed and commercial mentality for ivory which dominate thoughts and feelings of most of the White people in Congo is presented from a satirical point of view. Ivory has become an obsession with Mr. Kurtz representing all Whites whose sole motive is to get profits from the ruled country. Marlow once described White imperialists as ‘faithless pilgrims’.

On what basis can one say that Conrad is supporting racism or imperialism if he, being a European himself condemns the sadistic behavior and callousness of White imperialists towards the natives? The

way Marlow is depressed on seeing a lot of Black natives mostly naked chained to one another who have violated the laws and being punished by the White rulers implies Conrad’s criticism of imperialism and his deepest sympathy for the native figures who are suffering from starvation, disease and confusion. The apparent sympathy in the following passage simply represents Conrad’s severe criticism of his own race for creating such a chaos in Congo.

They were all dying slowly, it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, and they were nothing earthly now-nothing but black shadows of diseases and starvation lying confusedly in greenish gloom... (Heart of Darkness, p.7)

Though Achebe says that Heart of Darkness marginalizes the Africans, Marlow gives them prominence when he describes with vividness, the plight of the chain-gang and of the exploited workers dying in the grave. What the Europeans choose to ignore is given prominence by Conrad’s narrative.

The portrayal of Mr. Kurtz’s satanic behavior is yet another factor which justifies Conrad’s protest against any kind of imperialism in the world. Recalling an incident in the novel, when Marlow visits Kurtz’s house, a peculiar and an extraordinary sight surprised Marlow. He was astonished to see a number of wooden posts around the building with the heads and skulls of human beings hanging from the tops of each post. The Russian, who accompanied Marlow, explained that these heads and skulls were those of the men who had rebelled against Mr. Kurtz’s authority. This clearly demonstrates how Kurtz dominates native savages in an inhuman
manner. But the irony of this character is evoked, even when he is ill and is to be sent to Europe, he strongly resists leaving the natives. He has already become a native-like, and participated in all the activities and customs of Africans even at midnight rituals. But on the other hand, nothing took place to uplift the natives though Kurtz had written down the following words conveying an opposite message; “Exterminate all the brutes”.

Thus, Conrad doesn’t seem to be justifying this malicious behavior especially from a White as they have a high esteem for culture and refinements. My argument has to do with the fact that if Conrad is in favor of the dehumanizing practice of the Belgian imperialist, he definitely would have omitted all the negative incidents caused by the Whites and have admired a false development pretended by them as a worthy incident.

Though radical critical attacks on Heart of Darkness developed in the 1970s due to Conrad’s controversial narrative style as to whether he is supportive of imperialism or not, the anti-imperialism of Heart of Darkness too was a subject among few critics.

Hunt Hawkins (1979) argues that Conrad’s fiction challenges one of the dominant theories of the day that worked to justify imperial intrusions, that, natives thought of the European as a god, a super-being upon whom they became dependent. Hawkins remarks that while Frantz Fanon would investigate colonial psychology in his ‘Black Skin, White Masks’ (1952), Conrad similarly questioned the theory of native dependency (Psychology of Colonialism, p.86-7)

As a member of a disrupted culture, Peter Zazareth, a Guan Ugandan writer, speaks of the profound influence Conrad’s work exercised on his own ‘writing back’ as well as on that of Kenyan writer, NgugiWaThiongo’o. Nazareth contends that Conrad was the first to provide some criticism of imperialism. (Stape, p. 197). In Conrad and Imperialism (1983), Benita Parry argues that “by revealing the disjunctions between high sounding rhetoric and sordid ambitions and indicating the purposes and goals of a civilization dedicated to global… hegemony, Conrad’s writings(are) more destructive of imperialism’s ideological premises than (are)the polemics of his contemporary opponents of empire.(10).

Europeans generally based their claims to rule ‘primitive’ people on the basis of their own superiority, both technological and moral, and the English were no exception. ‘The White man must rule’, Lord Milner told the Municipal Congress in Johannesburg in 1903 ‘because he is elevated by many; many steps above the black man’ (Bennet, The Concept of Europe, 343).This view is harshly criticized by Conrad creating a pessimistic viewpoint of everything related to White imperialism. During Marlow’s journey to Africa, the sight of the French warship firing its guns into the jungle purposelessly and the sight of a rock being blasted are described pessimistically. The sight of the knitting women is yet another pessimistic image created by Conrad. The depressing portrayal of the White men working in Congo further enhances the absence of optimistic view of the writer. The manager at the station inspires neither love, fear, nor respect but ‘uneasiness’ and the White agents are described by Marlow as idlers and faithless pilgrims in a sarcastic manner.

Towards the closure of the novel, it is inevitable that we would be filled with horror and disgust with the spiritual emptiness of imperialists and their agents in the Belgian Congo. Despite the
blind belief of Europeans that they are superior and civilized in all aspects, there is no any difference between Europeans who are the so-called civilized group and the Africans. Patrick Brantlinger (1988) claims that Conrad paints Kurtz representing all White imperialists and native Africans with the same tar brush. Conrad portrays the moral bankruptcy of imperialism by showing that European motives and actions to be no better than African fetishism and savagery.

In a passage of the autobiographical work, ‘A Personal Record’(1924) that offers reflections on his own aims as an author, Conrad says;

In that interior world where his thought and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread of opinion to keep him within bounds…(p.xviii)

ANTI-IMPERIALISTIC PERSPECTIVE AND CONRAD’S NARRATIVE STYLE

Conrad is simultaneously a critic of imperialist adventure and its romantic fiction and one of the greatest writers of such fictions. The greatness lays behind his complexity of style- his impressionism.

What is impressionism? A literary style characterized by the use of details and mental associations to evoke subjective and sensory impressions rather than the recreation of objective reality (The American Heritage dictionary of the English Language: 2000)

Conrad’s impressionism is a controversial issue. It is, for some critics his most praiseworthy quality but for others it allows him to mask his nihilism. In Conrad’s Heart of Darkness we move into the heart of Africa through the eyes of Marlow who views the outer world within his closed consciousness. Very descriptive pattern of writing produces a new kind of conception on self identity. Marlow’s narration is more focused on inner consciousness than on the outward phenomenon. This new type of self-identity created by Conrad can be associated with his impressionist style.

In The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson argues that Conrad’s stories (Lord Jim is his main example) betray a symptomatic split between a modernist ‘will to style’, leading to an elaborate but essentially hollow “impressionism”. Heart of Darkness too betrays the same split but this split between a modernist ‘will to style’ and ‘impressionism’ corresponds to the contradictions of an anti-imperialist novel which is also racist.

David Hume is a renowned critic who is opposed to impressionism; according to Hume, there are two distinct kinds of human perceptions as impressions and ideas. Impressions are those with the greatest force and violence and our ideas are those of lively perceptions. In Heart of Darkness, Marlow’s narrations rely a lot on his impressions of Congo. Before beginning his tale, Marlow affirms that the most he can talk about are his inner impressions. Thus readers will never be allowed to ponder outside Marlow’s consciousness. Supporting this view, Ian Watt assures the inappropriateness of this narration by calling it ‘delayed decoding’. Readers do not get what the general meaning of an event is because Marlow can only decode his impressions. Watt says that
it is a slow process; a delayed meaning is less aware of reality and more aware of Marlow’s impressions.

On the contrary, my study on the anti-imperialistic perspective of Joseph Conrad is acutely enhanced through this impressionistic writing. What I would like to argue is that the innermost thoughts or impressions do have a strong reliance on outer reality. When Marlow sees suffering natives along with the cannibalism of Kurtz, he has developed negative and pessimistic impressions of the Belgian imperialistic rule in Congo. Apart from this fact, Marlow projects Conrad himself that Conrad’s agonizing Congo experiences in 1890 were reinterpreted through his sensitive narrator ‘Marlow’. Patrick Brantlinger (1988) is of the view that “Conrad is simultaneously a critic of the imperialist adventure and its romantic fictions and one of his critical irony and partly from the complexity of his style—his ‘impressionism’”. He further claims that as a social criticism, its anti-imperialist massage is undercut both by its racism and by its impressionism.

CONCLUSION

Achebe’s diatribe has provoked a number of vigorous defenses of Heart of Darkness which predictably stress Conrad’s critical stance toward imperialism and also the wide acceptance of racist language. The study on anti-imperialistic perspective of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness concludes that the absence of any hint of optimism in the Belgian imperialistic rule denotes sadism and brutalism of the imperialists and the pathos of helpless African natives. The pessimistic viewpoint of Conrad in the novel conveys his deep protest at imperialism and racism.

Can one write a novel on anti-imperialism without referring to racism? The truest nature of inhuman imperialists in the Belgian Congo would have been concealed if the writer was in favor of that culture. Marlow’s depressing words over the starving natives would not have been prioritized; instead Conrad might have admired the negligence and the ignorance of imperialists towards the predicament of African natives who suffer from starvation in the hellish environment. The way African natives being brutally dehumanized by the whites prompts further investigation of Conrad’s sarcastic viewpoint towards the so-called civilized Europeans. Especially the portrayal of Mr. Kurtz who is obsessed with ivory denotes the cruelty and inhumanity of Whites representing all imperialists. Conrad’s absence of humor in the narrative is yet another evidence of his strong protest at greedy imperialists.

Throughout the novel a gloomy and a dark atmosphere with starving and dying natives creates not humor but excessive pathos. Belgian imperialists’ sheer expectation of gaining profits from ivory is severely criticized. If Conrad supports colonization, he could depict the exact opposite situation as natives being civilized by the Whites. Thus, I would disagree with Achebe’s accusation at Conrad as a racist because Heart of Darkness is a novel with an extremely nihilistic impression with respect to colonialism and its disastrous effects on helpless African natives.

Conrad being a European himself seemed to be a revolutionary novelist in bringing out the defects of his own race through a moving and a disheartening record of the Belgian Congo amidst all the accusations continuously imposed on him as a racist.
Heart of Darkness is a social criticism with regard to power lust. Thus, in the political satire Heart of Darkness, Conrad’s anti-imperialistic message is undercut through a range of factors including racism, pessimism and furthermore by impressionism.

REFERENCES


