

Ethnocentrism in Literature: A Study of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and Joseph Conrad's *The Heart Of Darkness*.

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Abstract

Ethnocentric, Imperial language has long been one of the main criticism against English Literature. Some texts have been written in such a way that the language is derogatory of the subject culture and the depictions are degrading. Savage, uncivilized etc. are just some of the adjectives used to describe the natives. But in order to properly realize the inherent nature of said discrimination one has to start from the beginning.

Behn's *Oroonoko* and Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* are two of the most important texts written about ethnocentrism in literature. The texts showcase the psyche of the "civilized" and their twisted and brutal ways of "modernizing" the natives which is nothing more than exploitation. They depict how the natives are seen as inferior and the West as the Superior race. The language of the texts also throws light upon the way language was seen as a tool of "modernizing the natives". The aim of the paper is to study the texts and to bring out the ethnocentric tendencies apparent in the psyche of the Western colonizer and also to show how these texts expose the hypocritical nature of the imperialists.

Keywords: Colonizer, Ethnocentric Text, Ethnocentrism, Imperialists, Savage, Uncivilized, Natives, inferior natives, Superior West.

Introduction

Racism and ethnocentric behavior has been a part of human society for a long time and has led to some of the worst atrocities in history. As literature is the product of the times, many texts are ethnocentric and racially biased. They extol that the colonizer is "superior" since he is "advanced" and the natives are meant to be ruled. The texts also establish that it is the duty of the superior colonizer to "modernize" the natives in order to bring them to speed with the world. Such texts were the tools used by the colonizer to further their cause and to bring authenticity and sympathy to their cause. The texts were nothing more than tools in their arsenal to exploit the natives in the name of modernizing them. Said's *Orientalism* and other works throw light upon this aspect of colonialism.

Behn's *Oroonoko* and Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* deal with the aforementioned hypocrisy of the Western Colonizers. The texts are a brutal and vivid portrayal of the horrific deeds performed in the name of modernizing the natives and encapsulate the reality of the violence called as "colonization". *Oroonoko* deals with the violence perpetrated on the enslaved. It is a story of how a man is dehumanized and his life becomes his master's property. *The Heart of Darkness* on the other hand is a metaphoric tale of the darkness that has seeped into the "modern" civilization which views the natives as savages. Chinua Achebe says, "*Travelers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind*", which implies that narrators who are averse to the natives can bend the truths to fit their framework. That is their narrative will always be tinged with the biases which they harbor.

Such instances where the narrator is blinded to the truth of the natives leads to ethnocentric depictions of the native culture which when seen from the telescope of another leads to racial prejudices and ethnocentric biases.

Ethnocentrism in the novels

Ethnocentrism is the act of judging another culture based on preconceptions that are found in values and standards of one's own culture.¹ This implies that one sees one's culture as superior and other cultures as inferior. This was what prompted the race for colonizing the New World - the idea that the West was superior. When such an idea colonizes the land, the colonizer feels that their superiority has to be worshipped by the "uncivilized" natives and therefore creates the myth of Western Superiority. They suppress the natives, exploit the resources for their benefit and destroy any attempts by the natives to overcome the shackles. Their brutality and inhumanness is justified by them as being necessary in order to protect themselves.

The novel *Oroonoko* is one long narrative of brutality perpetrated on the natives by the West. The narrator says, "*I ought to tell you that the Christians never buy any slaves but they give 'em some name of their own, their native ones being likely very barbarous, and hard to pronounce; so that Mr. Trefry gave Oroonoko that of Caesar*"², which tells us that the colonizers were not only prejudiced against the native culture but were also of the opinion that the Western culture was superior. They saw the native names as "barbarous" and the Roman names as "glorious". Further in the novel the other natives are shown as savages are murderers and the English as the victims. The narrator says, "*About this time we were in many mortal fears about some disputes the English had with the Indians; so that we could*

¹ Omohundro, John T. *Thinking like an Anthropologist: A practical introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. McGraw Hill.2008.

² *Oroonoko*.p.24

scarce trust ourselves, without great numbers, to go to any Indian towns or place where they abode".³

In Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, on the other hand, we can deduct that the protagonist Marlow is a metaphor for the West and Kurtz is the voice of human conscience. Therefore the death of Kurtz and the continued existence of Marlow is an allusion to the victory of Capitalism over Humanism. The dying words of Kurtz therefore take on a different hue altogether. "With a mixture of "somber pride, ruthless power, craven terror," and "hopeless despair" he utters his final words "The terror! The terror"⁴, thus alluding to the horrors perpetrated in the name of modernization. When Marlow visits a station on the river he is met with the stations Chief Accountant who says, "When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to the death."⁵ Such instances peppered throughout the text show us that the attitude shown towards the natives was one of contempt and disdain. The natives were seen as inferior, savage and uncouth.

Perceptions about Africa

In literature, Africa is generally portrayed as undeveloped and primitive. Africa has been known as the needy "dark continent" characterized by primeval irrationality, tribal anarchy, civil war, political instability, flagrant corruption, incompetent leadership and managerial ineptitude, hunger, famine and starvation.⁶ Chinua Achebe says, "'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 bestiality".⁷ Even in modern times the continent of Africa is portrayed as a land of savages, of tribal bloodshed and of "horrors too great for the modern, civilized man".

Many other texts create an atmosphere of uncertainty when they speak of the African Continent and one such example is of the famous *Tarzan*. In *Tarzan*, the protagonist is shown to be a White, heterosexual male who is above the other species in the ecosystem, though he was raised by apes. This leads one to the idea that the White, heterosexual male is superior to other races and that the apes are a metaphor for the African community at large.⁸ Even in movies, such as the 2006 DiCaprio starrer *Blood Diamond* and Tom Hanks's *Forrest Gump*, we see the perceived "reality" of Africa.

³ Oroonoko.p.32

⁴ Nofal, Khalil Hassan. *Darkness in Conrad's Heart of Darkness: A Linguistic and Stylistic Analysis*. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 3, No. 3, p.453.

⁵ *The Heart of Darkness*.p.29.

⁶ Oguh, Chibuike. *The Representation of Africa in Western Media: still a 21st century problem*, 2015.

⁷ *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Background and Sources, Criticism*. 4th ed. Ed. Paul B. Armstrong, New York: W. W Norton and Co.pp. 336-349. 2006.

⁸ Oklopčić, Biljana. *Adapting the Adapted: Adapting the Adapted: The Black Rapist Myth in E.R. Burroughs' Tarzan of the Apes and Its Film Adaptations*.pp.318-321.

This leads one to question why Africa is so depicted. Is it because of the stereotypes that have become a part of our culture, the racially-charged beliefs that have become a new normal for us, or is it something else? Such portrayal of Africa and the African community has created an atmosphere where people have started believing the lies and are very vary of other races.

Language in the novels

In the novel *Oroonoko* we see that the Colonizers language is seen as superior to that of the natives and the cultural practices of the natives are seen as barbarous. The way the narrator talks about the customs of Coramantien throws light upon the prejudices held against the colonized natives by the colonizers. The narrator constantly distances herself from the other races by alluding to her “English” standing and leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind where her loyalties lie. She says, “*Oroonoko was first seized on, and sold to our overseer*”, thus drawing a distinction between her and the native Oroonoko. The natives too were vary of the outsiders whom they believed were without honour, for Oroonoko says,

*“But Caesar told him there was no faith in the white men, or the gods they adored; who instructed them in principles so false that honest men could not live amongst them; though no people professed so much, none performed so little: that he knew what he had to do when he dealt with men of honor, but with them a man ought to be eternally on his guard, and never to eat and drink with Christians, without his weapon of defense in his hand; and, for his own security, never to credit one word they spoke.”*⁹

On the other hand in Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*, language is used to create an atmosphere of gloom and dark uncertainty. Marlow says, “*At last we opened a reach. A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity*”¹⁰. His journey is painted as dark, desolate and the path they take is of “inhabited devastation”. The narrator time and again mentions his surrounding as savage and barbarous, “*To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly.*” Such instance in the novel leads one to argue that the narrator was biased towards his native surrounding. “*And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion*”¹¹, this depiction of the clearing where Marlow was shows the disdain with which he viewed his station.

⁹ *Oroonoko*.p.38

¹⁰ *The Heart of Darkness*.p.22

¹¹ *The Heart of Darkness*.p.36

Both the narrator in *Oroonoko* and Marlow in *The Heart of Darkness* are White, Westerners, and the narrative implies that they are better than the natives; thus throwing light upon the Eurocentric meta-narrative. The language of terror and brutality is also one of the most repetitive of languages in the novels. The violent acceptance with which Oroonoko murders Imoinda is brutally portrayed and the words are just fused with the violence felt by the characters. The narrator's description of Oroonoko giving "*the fatal stroke, first cutting her throat, and then severing her yet smiling face from that delicate body, pregnant as it was with the fruits of tenderest love*"¹² is only matched by the execution of Oroonoko. The narrator, with horror, describes Oroonoko's execution saying that,

"And the executioner came, and first cut off his members, and threw them into the fire; after that, with an ill-favored knife, they cut off his ears and his nose and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched him; then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe; but at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped".

The language in *The Heart of Darkness* on the other hand is of naked disdain against the natives. "*What a row the brute makes!*" said the indefatigable man with the moustaches"¹³, this statement by Marlow echoes the ethnocentric meta-narrative in the novel. Throughout the novel the characters deride the natives, poke fun at the "savages" and indulge in overall brutality towards the natives. The description of the natives attacking Marlow's company at the narrow stretch of the river is eerie. He says,

"The tumult of angry and warlike yells was checked instantly, and then from the depths of the woods went out such a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair as may be imagined to follow the flight of the last hope from the earth".

Conclusion

Both the novels, *Oroonoko* and *The Heart of Darkness*, deal with the Eurocentric portrayal of Africa as uncivilized and primitive. The narrative projects the ethnocentric perceptions about Africa that the West carries within its culture. The narrators in both the novels are Westerners, which alludes to the assumption that the West is civilized with respect to Africa; thereby "othering" the African natives. This power-struggle is apparent in the narrative as the Westerners commit all sorts of brutality in order to keep their stranglehold on the natives.

Chinua Achebe says of Marlow, "*The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It*

¹² *Oroonoko*.p.42.

¹³ *The Heart of Darkness*.p.40

took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people”¹⁴. This implies that though the question of ethnocentric biases was present in the language employed by Conrad through Marlow, it ultimately served as a tool to strengthen it rather than eradicating it. Achebe’s attempt to tackle these issues is present in his essay *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*.

The atmosphere and environment of the novels are plagued with gloomy and dark description. Marlow describes, “At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno”. Such description of Africa leads one to ideate the continent with primitive despair.

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¹⁴ Chinua Achebe. *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*.p.5.