

A Study of Racism and Exploitation in Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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Conrad's Heart of Darkness is one of his experience in the Congo river. He tells the story through the character Marlow. The story depicts the colonizers greed for power over the colonized. It was seen that the real aim of wasn't to help in the upliftment of black people, but was something hidden underneath the picture shown to the rest of the world. Heart of Darkness shows Africans as deprived people. As the European civilization expanded in Africa, imperialism set its roots and racism expanded and the Europeans used racist methods to get themselves towards achieving their goals. This paper looks for instances in the novella where racism can be confirmed and focusses on the darkness associated with the continent.

Keywords: Racism, Africa, discrimination, darkness

Some modern writers, for example Conrad, R. Kipling and Forster through their works namely, Heart of Darkness, The White Man's Burden and A passage to India respectively, put light on the issues of racism and imperialism. They penned down the colonial world into their fiction hence bringing colonization to art. Jonah Ruskin says, 'Modern novelists –from Conrad to Lawrence from Kipling to Orwell, from Forster to Cary -have been distracted with race, with social and national clashes.' Consistent with the Oxford dictionary, "racism is out of line treatment of different races or conviction that a few races of individuals are superior to other people"¹. People consider a particular race to be superior than the rest on the basis of prejudice, dislike, and generally on skin colour. This can also be considered as a discrimination of people on the basis of their ethnicity. The racist powers use their minds in such a way that they wish to mark their inferiority over the rest of the world.

"From the view purpose of ethnic minorities, and especially Americans of African plunges, our aggregate chronicles And encounters of connection with the white larger part are to a great extent characterized around a progression of severe establishments and practices .While laws have changed as to the treatment of racialized minorities over the profound structure of white inclination, force and benefit which has formed the undemocratic establishment of most human collaborations has not been balanced on a fundamental level."²,

this statement by Manning Marble throws light upon the problem of racism in America.

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness gives us a picture of Congo in the 19th century. Congo was seen as the foundation of the evils of colonization and imperialism. The blacks clashed with the whites and were considered as criminals. They considered the blacks to be inferior whereas the whites were seen as superior beings, above everyone. This long short story fits into the genre of colonial literature and the author uses the character of Marlow to recount and restate his experience in Africa's Congo. He explores the psychological impact of the divide between the colony and empire i.e., the blacks and the whites. Marlow finds out that

the colonizers have been decaying and corrupting the core of the jungle. Critics saw this text as the most powerful condemnation of imperialism. However, Chinua Achebe attacked this book as, 'The purpose of my observations should be quite clear at this point, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this basic truth is overlooked in criticisms of his work is because of the way that white racism against Africa is such an ordinary perspective that its indications go totally unremarked.'³ critics such as H. P. Lovecraft came to his support by defending his work as a product of modern racial morality. British and European cultures are the least racist now as compared to earlier times and it seems obviously difficult to notice some specks of racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* because of the way it is presented- normally.

This novella gives us a clear picture of the ill treatment inflicted upon the Africans. They were objectified as slaves and not looked upon as normal human beings. Blacks or niggers were inferior to the British and they had no goal, they wandered aimlessly like animals. Their attitudes totally annoyed the britishers; "Black figures walked around drowsily pouring water on the glow, whence a sound of murmuring continued, stream ascended in the twilight and the beaten nigger moaned somewhere"(HOD)

The beginning of the novel is believed to render darkness upon the continent of Africa through Conrad's description "I don't want to both oyu with what happened to me..." (HOD). Here Chinua Achebe views that Conrad tried to portray Africa in a bad light, as a place not so humane, but monstrous. The initial representation of the Thames and Congo as two different rivers too once again portrayed the darkness associated with Africa. He represented Congo as devious and dark, whereas Thames as modern and civilized. "Going up the river is like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world" (HOD) which meant that going up the river Congo is like going back in time.

"It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from a distance the white of their eyeballs sparkling. They yelled, sang; their bodies gushed with sweat; they had faces like grotesque masks- these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild essentialness, an intense vitality of development, that was as common and valid as the surf along their coast" (HOD) here Conrad describes African men as someone who has "faces like grotesque masks". This mingles them with the ugly picture of distasteful things. They are seen as weird and not worth looking at structures; and inhuman grotesquery continues symbolically throughout the novella. Black men are looked upon by white men as "men of labour", they are forced into hard work because the whites consider them to be efficient in such works of labour.

In another instance, Conrad portrays women as symbols and objectifies them as: "She was savage and heavenly (superb), wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something unfavourable and stately in her purposeful advancement. What's more, in the quietness that had fallen out of nowhere upon the entire pitiful land, the monstrous wilderness, the colossal body of the fertile and puzzled life appeared to look at her, meditative, as if it had been looking at the picture of its own ominous and energetic soul." (HOD) this passage seems completely fine until we look at the words "magnificent" and "superb" at a sub textual level. These two words, though completely normal above the surface, carry in them deeply profound objectification of women bodies. This is a positive portrayal of women at first glance but raises the reader's eyebrow if looked upon deeply. They have been presented as beautifully savage creatures who have been despoiled.

Conrad describes men as "unhappy savages" (HOD) hence, putting them in the same box as animals by portraying them with "tails". Singh agreed that darkness is prominent throughout the novel and is associated with Europe.⁴ Conrad is face to face with the discrimination faced by the Africans but would do nothing on humanitarian grounds to free them of their suffering. The story slowly comes forth and highlights passive

racism. The men here had no names, they were either referred to as some “black shapes” or “shadows” who suffered from diseases, had to starve and were “dying slowly”. These African people were looked down upon as mere shapes, inanimate things crawling in the dark jungles like animals. He didn’t notice the suffering of individual men but only paid little heed to people suffering in groups. He disregards a murdered man by the roadside by describing him as an animal killed in a road accident.

The lone instance of Marlow describing his crew workers by saying, “Yes; I looked at them as you would on any person, with an anomaly of their driving forces, intentions, limits, shortcomings, when brought to the trial of an unyielding physical need.” (HOD) He compares them to ugly animals who would feed on flesh, such as hyena. In first place he praises his team but later, does not leave any chance to demean them of their strengths, he highlighted their weaknesses by saying “They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences” (HOD) He looks at the unnamed helmsman as one of the “most stable kind of fools”; mourning for his death and questioning his worth by calling him a “savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara” (HOD) and instead of burying him with respect, Marlow suddenly decks him on board.

Conrad related every ugly/bad thing to the black Africans, he described physical appearances of albino women and referred to their features that he didn’t find worth looking at as ugly, “at night three lady of whom one pale skinned person, passed our camp; horried pasty white with pink blotches; red eyes; red hair; features quite negroid and revolting.” (HOD) Conrad’s racism can be viewed through these subtle observations as he connotated ugliness to blacks. For him, the white race was superior and didn’t have any spot of ugliness, if present then it would be rare. According to Farn, “Conrad’s representation of the Congolese as “savages” without merit can inspire a real craving for a historical fact. Because it depicts central Africa as being without a history and geographical unspecific.”⁵ Farn’s views can be clearly interpreted as Conrad’s disrespect towards the Africans.

The British set their feet in Africa with the aim of “lightening” the dark continent, figuratively. They believe it was the duty of the civilized to spread and maintain superiority. They showed their interest in natural resources such as ivory. Kurtz was one such man of enlightenment who was transformed into an inhuman creature by the virtue of greed. He was sent to civilize and help the natives of African continent, but he became a thief who stole their wealth by force. He didn’t trade their wealth, rather forced his greed upon the natives. He took wrong use of power and treated people as animals. He set himself up as the God of these native people in lieu of his authority upon the land because of the British colonials. They claimed to be the ones who would pave way for their civilization but it turned out to be the opposite of expected; as he became greedily interested in wealth above people.

Taking a note of all the sub textual inferences to the passages in the novella, Marlow can be regarded as a passive racist who through his personal experiences documents the aggressive reality of the racist world. Conrad fully intended his readers to rely on Marlowe for his narration. Through the unnamed narrator, Conrad tried to free himself of the accusations of racism being inflicted upon Marlowe. The whole novella is seen from the viewpoint of Marlow, no other character can be seen as someone possessing any sort of opinion. Despite Marlow’s low opinion, we have to infer reality from his mouthpiece.

Conclusion

Conrad’s Heart of Darkness worked on the surface level to describe Africa and Africans in a bad light based on their appearances and ethnicity. The Continent of Africa has been portrayed as the “heart of darkness” from where the horrors of racism emerge. The ideas put forth in the novella deny equality to the blacks and whites as Africans were forced to do labour and British served as the masters above them. The 19th century

witnessed a period of racism and imperialism in literature and Heart of Darkness is so far the best example of discrimination on the basis of race. The author depicted greed and all kinds of evil through his novel.

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