

Iniquitous Invasion by Imperial Forces in The Heart of Darkness

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“And this also,” said Marlow out of nowhere, “has been one of the darkest places of the earth.”

Marlow’s quest for adventure on sea and later his curiosity to meet the European lord of the forest- Kurtz in the Congo basin, takes him to the heart of darkness. This darkness, according to him, issues from the darkness manifest in the minds and hearts of the European trespassers. Heart of Darkness investigates issues bordering imperialism in highly convoluted ways. It’s the serpentine river in the heart of Africa that stands witness to the vicious and heinous crimes committed by the white intruders against the not-so-savage natives. As a child Marlow, the introspective narrator, had fancied visiting a blank space he spotted on the map of Africa where he was particularly attracted by a sinuous river with its head in the ocean and tail that travelled way back into the opaque forest. That space wasn’t blank anymore when Marlow embarked on the voyage to actually be there!

The company headquarters in Belgium where Marlow was interviewed for the ‘noble mission’ presented a weird aura. The place projected a sinister atmosphere. Two women were guarding the door of the office knitting black wool apparently for a funeral veil. The physician conducting Marlow’s medical examination questioned Marlow if he had a mental illness running in his family- all indicating that the decision of travelling to the Heart of Darkness for work was an insane choice. This was in spite of the fact that Marlow would be representing the company as a champion of the ‘civilizing mission’ of the Empire. The job of the Steamboat captain that Marlow bagged owing to the efforts of his aunt, was an appointment in place of another captain – Fresleven- who had been killed in fight with the natives in the Congo region where the Europeans had been running the business of smuggling ivory. As Marlow travels on a French steam boat towards the Congo river, he observes the grim landscape along the shore that was featureless yet inviting for a sailor. The comforting soundwaves of the sea felt homely. As he moved up the river, Marlow witnessed warships firing away into the dense forest as if there was a battle going on that the French were waging irrespective of any opposition from the jungle. The men on the warships were dying of fever and that was their fate. After thirty days of travel on the steamboat, Marlow finally came to see the Congo river but his job was still two hundred miles upstream the huge meandering body of water. Thus, Marlow hitched a ride on another steam boat captained by a Swede who warned Marlow not to be too confident going into the jungle. The latter had witnessed another Swede who hanged himself on a road because he couldn’t bear the elements or maybe, the country was too much for him.

At the company station Marlow witnessed black African men walking in a single file chained together, with each man in an iron collar. These natives were proclaimed criminals as they had broken “the never heard of laws” of the European colonizer and their master. This was the beginning of the introduction of Marlow with the violence, greed and ruthless desire of the white imperialist master whose methods were callous, treacherous and pitiless. The insensitivity and heartlessness of the white men who ran this system of slavery was heart-wrenching as well as disturbing. As Marlow describes –

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat, between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth,...Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by the slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.” (Conrad 29)

The labourers were slaves of the white masters who had been brought from across the coast against their will but through legal contract, the implications of which they did not understand. European law made no sense to them. In strange surroundings, given queer food, the slaves were starving, indisposed and disease stricken. The entire station of the company bore the appearance of a massacre or some pestilence-ridden land. The chief accountant of the company was the only person immaculately dressed who looked like a mannequin. He also kept the company’s books in order. Everything else at the station was in a mess. The business of the company was to send cheap cotton and beads and wire into the forest and ivory came back out in return. As Marlow gathered details he understood that a man named Kurtz was a great agent of the company and a remarkable person! Kurtz was in charge of a trading post deep in the jungle that was the Inner Station of the company. Kurtz alone sent as much ivory to the company as all of the other agents put together. The manager at the central station seemed to be conspiring against Kurtz out of jealousy. Marlow was able to reach the inner station only after a travel of more than two months. On the way his boat faced an attack by the natives whose spears and arrows were defeated by machine guns of the Europeans with some casualties on the steam boat, like the death of the helmsman. At the inner station, the Russian reveals that the natives didn’t want the ailing Kurtz to leave the forest on a steamboat, the reason for the attacks. Kurtz was the one who ordered the attacks. Kurtz was virtually the King of the jungle. It was Kurtz’s forest, Kurtz’s ivory and only Kurtz’s domain at the inner station. He was the one calling the shots- the lord of the natives.

Marlow came to know from the Russian that it was dangerous to ask Kurtz any questions. One couldn’t have conversation with Kurtz; one would only listen to him. Kurtz’s home was surrounded and decorated with a fence of stakes with black human heads on them, like globes on poles. It was a savage sight those heads on the poles were of the captured rebels, signifying the fate of those who did not follow the orders of Kurtz. The jungle was his stage and Kurtz was the hero of the drama composed by him to control the natives and smuggle the ivory. Marlow later found out that Kurtz wanted to exterminate the brutes or the savages working for him and this was the hidden mission he was carrying out in the guise of civilizing them. The meeting of Marlow and Kurtz was equally dramatic. Marlow was told that Kurtz was very ill. It appeared to Marlow that he was losing his mind. Kurtz looked like some kind of a sorcerer or maybe he was one with the natives wearing a headgear with antelope horns. Later when Kurtz was being taken away on a stretcher he looked like a ghostly

skeleton carved out of ivory who a hollow man was shaking its hand at the other men made of bronze as he gave his final orders to the natives. Marlow was handed over the most confidential papers by Kurtz as the former had gained his trust and Marlow in turn remained loyal to him. Kurtz was a mix of pride, power, ruthlessness, terror, and despair. His last words were “The Horror! The Horror!”

When Marlow returns to Europe he is seemingly disillusioned, frustrated and antagonized by the idea of being “civilized”. Several visitors come to make claim for the papers Kurtz assigned and handed over to him, but Marlow denies having them or only shares those papers he knows the callers have no interest in. After handing over the report of Kurtz to a journalist, Marlow has possession of some personal letters and a photograph of Kurtz’s fiancée. Marlow visits her to find that she is deep in mourning even after a year of Kurtz’s death. She earnestly questions and implores Marlow for information, especially pleading with him to repeat Kurtz's final words. Marlow informs her that Kurtz’s last words were nothing else but her name.

Literary critic Harold Bloom has opined that *Heart of Darkness* has been the most widely read and analysed text in Universities and other places of academics. He attributes this popularity to Conrad’s “unique propensity for ambiguity”. *Heart of Darkness* has been widely criticized in post-colonial studies by the likes of the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe who found the text as a derogatory record of the Africans. He found the book insulting and disgusting, displeasing, annoying and hostile towards the Black race. His allegation is that Conrad is embittered with Xenophobia. He has shown the Africans in a bad light as opposed to the civilized Europeans. But Achebe’s critics have argued that he has confused Conrad’s viewpoint with that of Marlow. Conrad was in fact sympathetic to the Africans and he laid bare the atrocities committed by the Europeans on the savages known as pilgrims in the story, to hide the unnatural behaviour of human beings with human beings of a different territory. Moral superiority of the Imperialist stands condemned. Conrad was in fact among the first writers to question the perception of Progress in the psyche of the Western controller. *Heart of Darkness* censures and disapproves colonial brutality in all its wicked forms. Conrad has appropriately delineated that there is very little difference between the “civilized European” and the “savage native”. There are parallels between London and Africa, Whites and Blacks, that significantly justify the treatment of the theme of imperialism and race in the *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad.

Thus, while the natives were primitive in their life style, the Imperialists were primitive in their thinking and actions. Marlow has been given the language by Conrad the way the post-structuralists would use it. The words lack the ability to relate the horrors of imperialism. This way the novella has garnered the modernist elements of literature. The reader has the free hand to interpret meaning and fill the gaps in the use of language. The inhabitants are ruthlessly treated, forced into inhuman labour, made to overwork given food they are not used to, their food like hippo meat being discarded by the agents of the European company, leads them to depressed states, deprivation, starvation, hallucinations, fear of the white masters. The natives felt that the whites had some supernatural powers that facilitated them in exercising control over their land and resources. The fake claim of imperialism about civilizing the natives and thus trespassing their land is laid bare. As Marlow introspects, the reader understands better how deep and dark the Darkness actually is! Mystery and suspense in the setting of the novel lends tension and death and deprivation add to the darkness.

Darkness in the depths of the jungle just like darkness in the hidden recesses of the human mind facilitates the evil doer. Kurtz represents the sinister possibilities at the Inner Station hidden far into the interior of the dense jungle. He has been able to exercise uninhibited control over the natives as there's no one to be answerable to for his actions. The end of his story is of lofty goals left unfulfilled. The horror he exercised upon the legitimate inhabitants of the jungle did not meet the climax he had desired. One may not fully imagine what else he could have planned had he lived longer! Corrupt ideals and immoral values of the company agents were ruling the Heart of Darkness. The whiteness in Africa is in fact the real darkness. The question of good and evil is thus addressed by Conrad in comparing the scheming white imperialists with the innocent black natives. The success of Kurtz is in a way the failure of the Europeans in Africa. The treatment of the inhabitants like wild animals shows the deception and double standards of the power hungry and greedy white man. Thus, the idealistic nature of Imperialism is condemned by Conrad through his mouth-piece, Marlow.

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