



JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)

An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Racism in Heart of Darkness

Leena

student, Department of English
JCC, Jagannath University

Abstract: In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, racism is a pervasive theme that shapes the narrative and reflects the attitude of European colonialism in the late 19th century. The novella explores the dehumanization of African people through the protagonist Marlow's journey into the Congo, where the portrayal of Africans is deeply rooted in stereotypes and Eurocentric perceptions of race. Africans are often depicted as primitive, savage, and voiceless, reinforcing colonial power structures and justifying exploitation. The narrative's treatment of race reveals Conrad's critique of imperialism and the inherent contradictions in his perspective. Critics have long debated whether *Heart of Darkness* challenges or perpetuates racist ideologies. While some argue that Conrad exposes the brutal realities of colonialism, others contend that the novella's portrayal of Africans reinforces harmful racial hierarchies. Chinua Achebe, in his famous critique, called Conrad a "thoroughgoing racist" for his failure to grant African characters humanity or agency. Thus, *Heart of Darkness* remains a complex and contested text in postcolonial studies, reflecting the tensions between anti-colonial critique and the racist assumptions of its time. This ongoing discourse highlights the novella's role in shaping the modern conversation about race, literature, and historical representation.

IndexTerms - – Eurocentrism, Dehumanization, Stereotypes, savages, Brutes.

Literature review

The novel *Heart of Darkness* written by Joseph Conrad talks about the portrayal of African people. Chinua Achebe is the main voice in this debate and he criticizes the work by writing an essay titled “An Image of Africa: racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”. He talks about the European view of Africa by Joseph and the racist stereotypes in the novel. This paper will discuss his ideas on racism and other scholars’ opinions. Joseph Conrad used words like savages, wilderness, darkness, and brutes for Africans and Achebe points out them as negative terms and dehumanization. These words describe Africa as a country lacking civilization, intelligence, and a chaotic place. According to him the journey in the novel is more focused on the protagonist’s struggle and not on Africa. Other scholars like Edward gave their perspectives by suggesting that Conrad’s novel supports colonialism and does not oppose colonial ideas. For some scholars, it is a critique of colonial attitudes. Achebe talks about other main themes like dehumanization, Eurocentrism, and darkness. He criticizes the portrayal of European culture as superior and Africa as dark. Conrad’s view and way of portraying support colonialism. Achebe describes that Africans only appear as background elements and are not portrayed as individuals.

In the essay “the colonialist bias of heart of darkness” by Frances B. Singh he addresses the portrayal of racism and colonialism by Joseph Conrad. According to him, Conrad portrayed Africa as a dark and savage place and also described Conrad’s idea of justifying colonial domination. He discusses colonialism’s brutality and perceptions of race. He also talks about Marlow’s awareness of the dehumanizing effects of imperialism.

Introduction

Joseph Conrad’s novel “*Heart of Darkness*” is an important work in English literature. The portrayal of racism in this novel has built criticism and debate among different scholars. It refers to the dehumanization of Africans and racist stereotypes. The African characters were not named by him they are always introduced as a part of the mysteriousness. These characters are only used to describe the journey of Marlow, a non-African. Africans were only portrayed as a mere shadow against European development. This paper will talk about the two critiques and their work. Chinua Achebe’s “An image of Africa: racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” and “the colonialist bias of heart of darkness” by Frances B. Singh both talks about the dehumanization of Africans and Joseph Conrad’s view while writing the novel.

Racism

The novel “Heart of Darkness” is a famous work in English literature canon but it became the topic of debate and criticism against Joseph Conrad because of its portrayal of Africa and its people. The dialogue that Conrad used in his novel at the first time Europeans encounter Africans was “certain enormous buck nigger” and on the other hand Europeans are described with the sentence “wanderers on a prehistoric earth”. It defines his blindness and makes him think about a particular group of society without any proper reason. It denies the humanity and the identity of Africans. The negative stereotypes that were used for Africans were like “savages” and “cannibals”. It signifies Conrad’s way of showing the superiority of Europeans and Africans as uncivilized people. According to Chinua Achebe, this novel dehumanizes the Africans by using racist language. Conrad depicted Africa as a place of chaos and compared it with civilized Europe. Achebe criticizes his racist language and says that Conrad’s portrayal of Africans is only showing them like elements that are used in the background all the importance is only given to European characters and presenting Africans as less than human. One of the examples of showing their superiority was the depiction of Kurtz in the novel. He was a European and given importance to him more than others. He was an ivory trader. Through these characters, the themes of corruption and darkness were portrayed.

White Supremacy

In the novel African workers were suffering from harsh conditions and brutal behavior from colonizers. These sufferings of Africans symbolize the exploitation on a broader level and the mindset of colonizers about them as lesser beings and the least important part of the total population. Their sufferings are portrayed in many scenes from the novel. The first scene was when they were forced to work and chained together, also referred to as “chain gang” in the novel. The portrayal of inhumanity faced by Africans when there was a group of workers who were sick and dying but no one helping them. Then the superiority of Europeans and suffering of Africans was shown when the heads of villagers (Africans) were mounted as Kurtz wanted to show his power and terrorize the local people. It depicts that they use Africans only to show their power. These all scenes depict cruelty and inhumanity. Benita Parry said, “This implicit endorsement of white supremacy is evident in the way African characters are marginalized and dehumanized.”

In response to Chinua Achebe, Frances B. Singh wrote an essay named “The Colonialist Bias of the Heart of Darkness” which mentioned racism as well as colonialism and its destructive impact. They both have a deep understanding of the themes of racism and colonialism in the novel. In the novel, an African was killed by a knife and there was no backstory about him, it defines the control of Europeans and Africans do not have

any control on themselves and the environment around them. They have no independence to speak about themselves. This story is only based on Marlow's point of view who was not an African, on the other hand, the one who was portrayed as a very important part of the ivory trade, Kurtz was also a European. It shows the domination of non-Africans. They are only depicted as civilized and the main part of the society. The last words spoken by Kurtz were "the horror! The horror!" these were the symbol of realization and corruption of colonialism and its negative effects but Marlow's point of view is different as he described it as only personal destruction and darkness of the human soul. He depicted it only as a personal problem not on a broader level. The exploitation of Africans as well as their resources by Europeans. The trade of ivory from Africa to Europe symbolizes the themes of greed and exploitation. They were exploiting their resources for their own development. Kurtz was the main character in doing this trade he tried to collect ivory as much as possible.

Portrayal of Africa

The whole novel was based on Africans and Africa but no proper description of the culture of the country was there, this country has a rich history and culture but was not described throughout the novel. It shows how they consider their cultures inferior and not very important to be discussed. Wilson Harris argues about the depiction of Africa in the novel and also creates a contrast between the so-called European civilization and the African wilderness. It criticized the superficial nature of European civilization. The mission to civilize them was started by Kurtz it depicts that they do not think that they can be civilized in their own way and give more importance to their culture which can only make them civilized and help in their development as this will be beneficial for Europeans. They think that it is necessary to enlighten Africans with their ways and ignore their destructive result even after developing and civilizing themselves.

Effects of Colonialism on Africans and Europeans

Colonialism is not only destroying Africans but also the colonizers. Kurtz was destroyed by only his greed and colonial behavior. He can also be portrayed as wild because they were portrayed as civilized only in front of Africans but their work of ivory suggests how wild they were while no one was around them or at places like forests. When Marlow was going to Kurtz, the journey was not only about the darkness of the forest it was also about his journey to know his own and the darkness of colonialism. The events like when he was attacked also symbolize the destruction and negative impact of colonialism on both colonizers and the ones who were colonized.

The words like savages were used for Africans but Europeans were also defined as savages. They depict themselves as civilized but their behavior and brutality towards other Africans signifies their way of behaving like savages, with whom they do not like to live and only use them and their country for their development as well as their country. Cedric Watts highlights the interplay between civilization and savagery and questions the ethical implications of Marlow's journey. Kurtz was known for his power in the novel but his alienation from the other Europeans signifies the moral decay that he understands over time. He understands the destruction of colonialism on a personal level as well as a broader level. The isolation was also faced by Marlow when he was going to Congo he was detached from the beliefs and the society where he used to live. Both of the European characters become isolated from the society. The superiority of Europeans and the inferiority of Africans also lead to colonial isolation. There was no connection between them, this isolation led to a lack of understanding and exploitation.

Novel's perspective

The comparison between civilized Europeans and savage Africans is prominent throughout the novel. The civilized also behaved like savages, their actions like brutal behavior with Africans, and Kurtz's action when he hanged the heads of Africans to show his power and terrify the population was also considered as brutality. According to Conrad, this is only the darkness within a particular human soul and it is not a problem of colonialism on a broader level. It symbolizes Joseph Conrad's colonialist view of understanding different situations. He was not able to understand the sufferings of Africans.

The way of narrating the novel also plays an important role in the novel. The story was framed through Marlow's point of view and his personal experiences. As he was a European or colonizer his perception was different from Africans and only talked in favor of his country. He did not understand the feelings of the indigenous population. This way of narrating the novel made different perceptions of readers. Johann G. Stahl argues that the narrative technique that is used in the novel raise's questions about the limits of knowledge and the nature of storytelling.

Conclusion

In conclusion, racism against Africans in their own country is not a small issue. As it is not only about ruling it also talks about their sufferings and Europe's brutal behavior toward them. Joseph Conrad did not use words that should not be used by any human being. Chinua Achebe, Frances B. Singh, and other scholars criticized this work and Joseph Conrad for not paying attention to African's sufferings and their

dehumanization. It highlights his perspective on colonialism, which was considered negative by many scholars and most of the readers.

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