

The Element of Darkness in Conrad's Heart of Darkness

Abstract

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is a novel which refers to Africa as the Dark Continent and thus Conrad names it as the "Heart of Darkness". Conrad presents a stereotyped image of Africa as seen through the eyes of the Europeans, which for the most part, ignore the intricate African culture, or discard it as something 'uncivilized' and 'savage'. At some points the novel also depicts the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. But Conrad seems to be attacking the African culture by making it responsible for the degeneration that Kurtz undergoes.

Keywords: Conrad, Heart of Darkness, Marlow, Kurtz, racist.

Introduction

Achebe blamed Conrad of being a 'bloody racist' long after the latter's publication of the 'Heart of Darkness'. There are some critics who feel that 'Heart of Darkness' is not only a direct reference to the interiors of Africa but also to the dark abyss into which Kurtz eventually falls. It should be noted that if Kurtz is symbolic of Faustus then Africa undoubtedly becomes a metaphor for Mephistopheles. The very title of the novel invokes the western concept of Africa as a 'Dark Continent'. It raises several objections – Why does Africa alone become the 'Heart of Darkness'? Or why can't the novel be set in England if Conrad wanted to hint at the 'brooding gloom' of Europe? What Achebe feels is that Conrad, as almost all other non-native writers, portrays a 'stereotyped' Africa. It is the 'Africa' as seen through the eyes of the Europeans, which for the most part, ignores the intricate African culture, or discards it as something 'uncivilized' and 'savage'. A part of the problem lies in the fact that Africa remained undiscovered until the end of the nineteenth century, although the outer boundaries of Africa had been known to the Europeans, from where they conducted most of their trade of getting gold, ivory, and slaves which were brought to them by African middlemen. Moreover, they had no desire to penetrate the interiors of Africa, on the north lay the great Sahara Desert, which had separated the western and African civilization.

One of the interesting aspects of the novel is that it is narrated by a person who is not even a witness to all these events but simply a narrator of Marlow's observation. Though the narrator cannot be seen as articulating Conrad's views, Achebe feels that Conrad "neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference."¹ "Marlow seems to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence"². However, since these are Marlow's observations, narrated by a third person, they would lack the authority granted to them by the 'Author'.

"Heart of Darkness" brings out very clearly the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized – the natives being treated as mere 'savages' and deprived of a voice with which they could express their sufferings, or question the white men's authority over them. Conrad's refers to Africa as a land of superstition, witchcraft and evil. Moreover, even the degeneration, that Kurtz undergoes, takes place in Africa which implies that it is the Dark Continent alone which is responsible for it. The superstition and witchcraft that seem to be haunting the African Continent can also be noticed in Marlow's description of Kurtz' African mistress:

She walked with measured steps . . . she had brass leggings to the knee, brass gauntlets to the elbow. . . innumerable necklace of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charm, gifts of witchmen, that hung about her glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. (89)

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Aim of the Study

The present paper attempts to examine Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in relation to the post-colonial literature. It also focusses on the stereotyped images of the African culture and society that have portrayed by the author.

The novel may be seen as anti-imperialistic or anti-colonial but it projects the typical European image of the 'Other'. Marlow speaks of the fireman as an 'improved specimen' and 'to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap' (64).

The 'native' seems to be slightly improved only when he comes in contact with a Europeans. Marlow, truly representing the colonizer, not only fails to understand the beliefs, traditions and customs but also seems to be making no effort in doing so. He is scornful in his description of the fireman who 'had filed teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge". (64) Marlow further comments that 'he was useful because he had been trained". (64) For the colonizers the whole process of colonization meant instructing a particular class of natives so that they could perform various jobs for them. In fact, as Macaulay observed, in the context of Indian education, the whole process of educating the natives was to produce men brown in colour but English in tastes. These men were then employed under the English to serve as clerks but were never endowed with any position of authority. Such men were, to a large extent, deprived of their own customs as the colonizers imposed their customs upon the natives. The natives remained 'savages' as long as they were not trained and even when they had been instructed to observe the customs of the white men, they became objects of scorn and ridicule as they were trying to mimic their masters, i.e., the colonizers. Thus the natives found themselves in a highly uncompromising position. Just as the natives found themselves torn between two strikingly different worlds, so does Marlow keep frequenting two worlds, invariably contradicting his own observations. We notice him referring to the natives as 'savage' or 'nigger', a term that came to be looked upon as derogatory, but on the contrary, when Marlow comments on the colonial enterprise, he simply says that it is 'the conquest of earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter nose than ourselves.' (34) Here, it seems as though Marlow does not essentially differentiate between the colonizer and the natives on racial grounds. In other words, it is only the physical traits of the natives which set them apart from the colonizers.

Conrad has portrayed a 'stereotyped' Africa in the novel. It is Africa as seen through European eyes. It is a land of forests, wilderness, primitive

customs, witchcraft and noises that can only bewilder an alien. "It is, the clichés insist, the Africa of sudden sunsets, vultures, black-water fever. So alien that it can only be described in paradox, it is a desert in which vegetation riots, a gloom on which has no meaning, no shape, no coherence . . . its main purpose is to provide a convenient background for the anguish self-questioning European characters. 'There are moments', says Marlow, 'when one's past comes back to one'. Most significantly, this is a landscape without figures, an Africa without Africans'. At the very outset of the novel Marlow says, "And this also has been one of the dark places on the earth," (33) thereby making it extremely evident that Britain itself must have appeared a savage wilderness to Roman colonizers; nonetheless, Conrad still nourishes the European notion of Africa as a Dark Continent, portraying Congo as the 'Heart of Darkness'.

Conrad deprives the natives of any voice.

They seldom speak and even when they do so it is an incoherent babble, unintelligible speech. Marlow observes that on one occasion "a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. It culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking . . ." (67)

For Conrad, Africa is not a land of human beings; it simply remains a symbol in the background of which he portrays his characters and events. It is an Africa where one can only discover "a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a world of black limbs, a mass of hands clappings, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage". "Africans in such a landscape would begin to question the clear demarcation between the observer and the mystery, between the white man and his burden." Marlow describes the landscape thus:

The beaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of tress would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day. Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell. The dawns were heralded by the descent of a chill stillness . . . We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. . . . The streamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a mad house. (63)

Even Marlow's concern over the corpse of his helmsman is quite sardonic when he says, "I had made up my mind that if my late helmsman was to be eaten, the fished alone should have him. He had been a very second-rate helmsman while alive, but now he was dead he might have become a first-class temptation, and possibly cause some startling trouble." (79) His observation is marked with the suspicion that the other natives present on board the ship might express their desire of eating then helmsman's flesh. At another place Marlow talks of these people as cannibals – "We had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for the crew. Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place" (62) The concept of 'cannibalism', which comes mainly from Europe, has been debated and there is no evidence till date to suggest that the Africans really indulged in such a hideous practice. It is merely the stereotyped version of Africa that Conrad depicts here.

Conrad attributes the degeneration of Kurtz to his presence in the heart of darkness. The first time we come across Kurtz in the novel is in Marlow's conversation with the chief accountant of the Company that employed Marlow. The accountant tells Marlow that Kurtz had been the best of all the agents they had. He was posted as 'the chief of the Inner Station' and sent in 'as much ivory as all the others put together. . . ." (50) Later on when Marlow meets another agent and inquires about Kurtz, he is told that Kurtz "is a prodigy" and "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and the devil knows what else" (53). This description of Kurtz arouses a kind of curiosity in the reader as well as Marlow. Both look forward to meeting Kurtz as soon as possible but unfortunately once Marlow reaches that "Inner Station", we are shocked at the sight of "those heads on stakes" (85) that formed a kind of fence for Kurtz habitat. These heads belonged to the rebels. It is here that we discover that Kurtz's character stands in sharp contrast to what had been revealed to us in the beginning of the novel. A person who had once been a painter, poet and a remarkable person had now assumed the role of a demi-god. He had undergone spiritual degeneration. Instead of civilizing the natives, he himself had turned 'savage'. However, it is only in the last moments of his life that Kurtz realizes that he had undergone complete degeneration in Africa. It is at the moment of his death that he sees vision, which makes him cry, "The horror! The horror!" (97). What this horror is, has been left to be interpreted by the readers. It could have been, perhaps, Kurtz's realization of the spiritual abyss into which he had fallen which aroused this kind of feeling in him. Or, alternatively, it could have been the remembrance of his "Intended" who knew nothing about Kurtz's corruption and felt that he was an ideal for other. Even this latter realization might have been a cause of repentance for he had betrayed someone who loved and valued him the most.

Conrad may be unconscious of the fact that he was being a racist in the treatment of his characters. While Marlow has no sympathy for Kurtz's African mistress, he is deeply moved by the innocence, profound faith and love depicted by Kurtz's

'Intended'. He even goes to the extent of telling her that the last thing that Kurtz uttered was her name. He is so sympathetic about her that he leaves her under the illusion that Kurtz really was an exceptionally good man whom all those who knew would treasure all their lives and that he would remain an ideal for others. It leaves one wondering if Marlow would have shown similar sympathy had Kurtz's 'Intended' if she had been a woman with same virtues as his 'Intended' except for the colour. We are only left to infer, through Marlow's feelings towards Kurtz's African mistress, that Conrad is really being racist in the sense that Achebe blames him even though he might not have been conscious of this.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the portrayal of culture is different when portrayed by a native from the author's who are non-natives. It is usually marred by the images prevalent in the other societies, in this case, the English society.

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Footnotes

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