

## **Violence, Brutality and Exploitation in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: the Post-Colonial Perceptions**

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### **Abstract**

The multilayered adventure-travel narrative '*Heart of Darkness*' (1902) by Joseph Conrad presents the darkest secrets of colonialism and its brutal implications. Set in central Africa, the novella recounts Conrad's travel experience to the interiors of the Congo, where he witnessed colonial brutality, ruthless exploitation and greed in the guise of what Kipling urges to "Take up the White Man's burden" (1). The title refers to the mysteries of 'the dark continent' at the surface level but the underlying contradictions reveal how the European powers exploited, humiliated, and brutalised the natives in the Congo to satisfy their greed for power, domination and authority. The work has been regarded as an attack on colonial ideology while questioning the hegemony of colonial discourse that justified colonialism and its operating procedures. However, the postcolonial framework has questioned colonial thought and action, leading us to take the issues with fresh perspectives on colonialism by making us aware that its effects were far reaching, violent and disturbing. The adventure motif centres around the two leading characters Marlowe and Kurtz who understandably reveal the sly and dark horrors/secrets of the violent and brutal world that was once the integral part of the interiors of Congo, exposing the paradoxical nature of Eurocentrism, imperialism and colonialism. The paper sets out to explore the brutal, violent and exploitative nature of colonialism and aims to examine the effect of colonialism by subverting the very idea of Eurocentrism.

**Keywords:** Brutality, Colonialism, Imperialism, Post Colonialism, Violence.

### **1. Introduction**

The famous novella '*Heart of Darkness*' is a dark tale of exploitation, violence, cruelty and brutality revealed through the eyes of Conrad's famous frame narrator Marlowe in the region of Congo exposing the darkest secrets of colonialism and its manifestations. The journey motif not only reflects the writer's own experiences as narrated by Marlowe but also exposes the paradoxical nature of colonial enterprises in the realms of Congo. The title alludes to 'the dark continent' that refers to 'the interior of Congo' - a place of 'awe and wonder'

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while underlying postcolonial frameworks reveal the horror, crimes, brutalities, injustices, discrimination, starvation and exploitation that took place in the 'darkness' of interior Congo. The region of the Congo at that moment witnessed a great crisis in their history. In fact, Conrad hesitatingly exposes the inherent contradictions of colonial enterprises that they were full of violence, superiority-complex and that the commercial exploitation were part and parcel of the imperialistic thought and action. The book projects the horrific underpinnings of imperialistic thought and action that turned the Congo into such a place fit for colonial manifestations, where colonial powers not only plundered the natural resources but also subjugated, discriminated and exploited the people impacting them in multifarious ways. Conrad perceived the contradictions between the 'White Man's Burden' to civilise the non-civilised. However, post-colonial studies signify that the core of evil lies not in the heart of man but the ideology that makes him so.

## **2. Violence, Brutality and Exploitation in Colonialism**

The violence, brutality, discrimination, subjugation, starvation and commercial exploitation has been a recurring phenomenon in the history of mankind. There had been many turning points and epochs in human history that witnessed violence and bloodshed with all its multifarious impacts. Arabs, Turks and Nomadic Invasions, wars, racial conflicts, slavery, genocide and sexual violence have been the dark spots in the global history. But the most defining moments was that of colonialism and imperialism that encompassed all such traits in one action that left its indelible marks on the global history and mankind. In the general sense colonialism is a term that can be defined as a state where a country conquers and rules over other countries and exploits the resources of the conquered country for its own benefits. The conqueror country deploys a certain mechanism to maintain control and authority over the colonised that entirely changes the social, cultural, physical and economic structure of the region whereby it operates because it is combined with a kind of ideology that manifests superiority and authority in itself. The colonial interventions across the globe affected indigenous lands in multilayered ways, deliberately sabotaging their wealth, culture and environment. On the other hand Post-colonialism refers to "a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century" (J Daniel Elam, 2).

Post-colonialism is a kind of framework that analyses the impacts of colonialism and questions the ideology behind colonialist thought and action. Influenced by the enlightenment ideas, Europeans, particularly Britishers, believed that it was their duty to spread the fruits of new knowledge systems to the lands they were trading, particularly in the 'non white' spaces. They termed all such expeditions in Kipling's words as 'White Man's Burden' and thought themselves superior in race, class and colour. Their beliefs was that the cultural importance of their ancestors and own lands had been more civilised and ethical. Imbued with such ideas, they termed natives as savage or undeveloped or uncivilised or 'the other' and therefore inferior to the whites. In the pretext of such ideological beliefs, colonial powers not

only colonised and dominated the 'heart of Congo' but also imposed unjust mechanics and methods to control them and finally left them devoid of their culture, lands and natural resources.

### **3. Violence, Brutality and Commercial Exploitation in the '*Heart of Darkness*'**

Tragically, *Heart of Darkness* is an unending saga of colonial brutality, authority, racial discrimination, violence and commercial greed in Congo that becomes in Marlowe's words "one of the dark places of the earth" (HD,3). It is an attack on colonial hegemony, superiority, and duplicity of "the white man's" paradigms of civility that otherwise subordinated and discriminated indigenous populations on the basis of class, race, culture and colour, and termed them as 'the other'.

To begin with the title, the phrase 'Heart of Darkness' refers to the innermost region of Africa and its primitive ways of living about whom 'the whites' presumed that they were uncivilised, 'devilish' and living in the dark ages. Colonisers thought them to civilise through control and domination while unleashing violence and brutality as Conrad states, "I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! These were strong, lusty, red eyed devils that swayed and drove men [...]" (HD,18). Natives of the Congo region have been discriminated and thought to be uncivilised or 'devilish' but the postcolonial frameworks infer that they practised innocent ways and were pure at hearts while the colonisers seemingly civilised, took devilish and evil ways to brutalise and control the natives. It fully deconstructs the rhetoric of 'white man's burden' and exposes the colonial brutality and cruelty that the imperialists inflicted upon the natives and exploited them.

When Marlowe reaches the outer station, he begins to witness hellish treatment meted out to men and women and his notions of Congo as a region of awe and wonder fades abruptly. That he witnesses the unimaginable reign of violence as he finds many natives have been chained as slaves without proper food and shelter and are brutally treated and even chopped off their hands for petty offences such as disobeying the minor orders as fetching water or something. He cites an example when a native, thought to cause fire, has been beaten harshly: "[a] nigger was being beaten nearby as one of them had caused the fire in some way; be that as it may, he was screeching most horribly" (HD, 27). It exemplifies colonial violence, and domination in the region against the natives that Marlowe feels pity and sympathy for the Africans as 'others' - the dark side of Europe. Chinua Achebe in his "*An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*" comments that "*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" (338).

As soon, Marlowe reaches the inner station, he is introduced to Mr.Kurtz, whom he first finds, a lover of art and compassion but contrary to that he is a dictator who is greedy for the material gains and hungry for unlimited power, position and authority. The inner station where

Mr Kurtz operates is a kind of hell signifying extremes of violence, horror and greed. Interestingly, Kurtz is educated, civilised and has a love for art and literature but in the interiors of Congo he becomes a savage, authoritative, and uncontrollable for he thinks that whatever is there belongs to him and he can do whatever he likes. As an epitome of Victorian enthusiasm for power and authority, he makes perfect use of his superior knowledge, tactics and cunning eloquence in establishing his supremacy in the jungles of Congo. He controls the jungle and the natives in most brutal ways. To cite, "[...] his hut in the inner station is surrounded by the skulls of men who did not obey him [...]" (HD, 61). It is learnt that he deliberately had ordered the execution of many tribal leaders who had rebelled against him in the past and got stuck their skulls facing to the those houses that didn't obey him in order to frighten them. As the Russian tells Marlowe that Mr. Kurtz is not at all afraid of the natives, because he has created an environment of fear that the tribal chiefs come crawling to pay their respect to him and worship him as a demi-god. He has come to be regarded as a kind of deity to whom the natives offer certain sacrifices and certain mysterious rites and is asked to "preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which—as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times—were offered up to him—do you understand?—to Mr. Kurtz himself (HD, 84). Mr. Kurtz, an in-charge of ivory trade, also a symbol of commercial greed and loot whose sole aim is to multiply company profits at any cost. He is a capitalist coloniser who can go to any extent to attain the company's economic pursuits. The killing of elephants for ivory is just a brutal way to control nature and natural resources. He, in course of time starts to control everything in the jungles of Congo for his personal gains and becomes an epitome of commercial greed and exploitation in the interiors. He proves to be very useful to the Company's colonial commercial manifestations as he proves both a ruthless administrator and a shrewd manager to multiply profits at the cost of humans and even non-humans. According to the manager of the Central Station, Mr. Kurtz is the best agent and an exceptional man, 'a prodigy', of the greatest importance to the Company in the interior of Congo. In such a process Kurtz finally becomes a savage of the interior of Congo like an image of darkness and evil itself.

In fact, intellectuals of colonial discourse justified colonialism as 'white man's burden', as they had worked to improve the conditions of backward nations across the globe. There is no doubt that white men as individuals with good intentions had put great efforts in spreading modernism during colonialism. Europeans have been instrumental in spreading modern knowledge, information, and technology where they ruled. But its darkest side was overlooked as powers inflicted pain, suffering, and violence to gratify their love for power, wealth and control. These colonial endeavours not only destroyed local man and matter but destroyed educational and cultural patterns of the natives and made 'the other' in their own lands.. As Kurtz is responsible for the education of the natives but tortures them and imposes the bureaucratic mechanics to control them via controlling their culture and education. The narrative reflects that cultural harmony of the natives has also been disturbed by Kurtz, who

tried to divide tribes in warring groups and instigated them to rage one another for his personal gains in the ivory trade.

But what is the result of such aimless pursuits; Kurtz's hunger for power, ivory greed and cruelty finally leads him to death and dies with the cries of "The Horror! The Horror" (HD, 90). His famous words while dying, "Exterminates all the brutes" (HD, 63) brings out the core of the vilest manifestations of colonial enterprises. The dying image of Kurtz reminds us that the rise of the colonialism inflicted pain and harm to both the colonised and the coloniser in subtle ways and that its effects are beyond comprehension. On Conrad's return to Belgium he meets Kurtz's fiancée and he actually lies and tells her that Kurtz's last word was her name because he did not want to undecieve her by disclosing Kurtz's savagery in the interiors of Congo that show the readers the hollowness of the Victorian idealism for of civilising Africa and rest of the world.

#### **4. Conclusions:**

This postcolonial study aimed to expose the readers to the suffering, exploitation, killings and pains caused due to colonialism and imperialism particularly in central African and Asian countries but in general all over the world. The after effects of colonialism are more dominating as the colonised find it difficult to shade their past ravages of mis-treatments, cultural mutilation and colonial apathy. They are now practising decolonization by revisiting their cultural roots that have been uprooted long back. But they are also fearful of impending effects of Neo- colonialism that has again started to control 'third world nations' through its superior economies and technological advancements.

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