

Imperialism in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

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Abstract – Present paper is a comprehensive analysis on the dark truth and theme, 'Imperialism' during the African Colonial era in Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'. Conrad was successful in unfolding the brutal reality of imperialism under the disguise of economic development and civilization in Congo, Africa. He exposes the avarice and rapacity of the Europeans, through the main character of the novel, Kurtz. He is depicted as the personification of deception and brutality. This research examines how the Europeans employed various strategies to imperialize a nation and reveals the agonizing story of western destructive power.

Key Words: Hypocrisy, Cruelty, Greed

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INTRODUCTION

Imperialism is the policy of taking control of one country by another country through martial, political or economic control. The word imperialism is derived from the word 'empire'.

It is an intrinsic part of colonization which leads to mistreatment of not only the colonized people but also influences the language, culture, social and economic aspects of that particular area or country negatively. A number of European countries like the U. K., France, Spain and Portugal colonized many parts of Asia, Africa and South America in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It all started in the beginning of eighteenth century when industrial revolution initiated in most of the European countries which led to a tremendous increase in the demand for raw materials. This demand for raw materials forced them to explore the world in search of cheap raw material and labor which resulted in the colonization of Asian countries particularly for raw material and African countries for slave labor. Imperialism became the most popular policy followed by most of the European countries by the end of nineteenth century.

After acquiring the control and power, colonizers and imperialists take a supreme position and treat the native people and resources as profit making machines. As Richard Twiss has rightly said, "the real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth, what they produced, how they produced it, the control was introduced and managed to deconstruct the people's sense of self and replace it with that of the colonizer. This would occur when a people's perception of themselves and their world

was overthrown." The major motive of the imperialists was to take control of the raw materials of that colony and safeguard it from other competitors. The indigenous population was treated brutally by the imperialists. The natural resources including the flora and fauna were also devastated and used for the economic advancement of the imperialistic countries. In contrast to their deeds, all the imperialistic powers tried to justify their excessive control over these colonies in the name of educating and improving the lives of so called 'dark skinned'. As Edward W. Said has rightly commented, "Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate."

Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' is a fine example of imperialism in the context of Congo. It is a true description of the poor state and ill treatment of native people in the hands of self-proclaimed "Civilized people". Conrad himself toured Congo as a sailor and he is speaking his experience through Marlow. Marlow's description of the dark continent is subconsciously influenced by Conrad's own experiences in Congo. There are many themes in "Heart of Darkness" but this article will focus particularly on the theme of imperialism as this book is considered to be the bible for scholars who desire to study imperialism in fiction. There are all the elements of imperialism like greed, hypocrisy and racial discrimination which are abundantly present in the book. All these aspects will be looked at closely in the light of imperialism and colonialism in this article.

GREED AND POWER

Greed is the primary reason behind the colonization of many nations in Africa. Infact, the hearts of the Europeans are full of darkness with the greed of ivory and other resources of Congo 'It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness'. (8) This was Marlow's opinion about the looting of the African nations. People with greed would even resort to murdering the people who oppose and they forget to show mercy towards the unarmed. Kurtz, the main character of the novel, is the employee of a Belgium company to trade ivory in Congo. Ofcourse, ivory trade is the most significant part of the colonial project in Congo at that time. Gradually, he becomes so powerful by doing so many unscrupulous deeds that he is able to dominate all the inhabitants. He is depicted as the representative of the Europeans whose hearts are filled with greed and in the disguise of helping the natives, their resources are looted or robbed. We can notice that Kurtz became so engrossed with this darkness of greed, that in the end he gives his life for the ivory trade. His greed was so much that they didn't really have any concern about the condition of the natives but would use them for obtaining maximum profit. He exploited them until 'they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away' (25) He was so concerned about the profit share of the ivory he had collected. Marlow recollects what Kurtz told him:

"This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H'm. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do—resist? Eh? I want no more than justice.' (123-124) Kurtz became greedier to achieve his dream of acquiring more wealth. He was never content with the amount of ivory he collected and he is a true portrayal of a society gripped with power and greed.

HYPOCRISY

Hypocrisy is an integral part of imperialism. This strategy was intensively followed by colonizers especially the European men in the book to show the outer world that instead of exploiting the natural resources of the colony, they were trying to educate and improve the lives of native people. It was their tool to justify their cruel and brutal activities. It was in this pursuit to show their benevolence, the company decided to call Kurtz back to illustrate its disagreement with his brutal ways. They tried to create an impression of being compassionate and concerned about the unfortunate living conditions of native people. It is quite evident to see how Marlow's aunt believed that he is going to Africa to give light and knowledge to those under-privileged people.

"Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all the humberg, got carried off her feet. She talked about weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways." (17)

The sole motive of Marlow's company was to attain maximum profits by selling ivory. The employees did not mind exploiting the people as well as animals to maximize their profits. It was a sheer quest for money and profits. Their indifference to the sufferings caused by them on the native people show the darkness hidden in their hearts. Africans were treated as mere objects by the fair skinned people as Marlow himself refers to Helmsman as a piece of machinery.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Racism, racial discrimination and segregation were also some of the prominent features of imperialism during the African Colonial era. Europeans of the 19th century were, undeniably racist when compared to the modern and today's people in Europe. So, it is understood that a writer from their community would definitely show many glimpses of racial discrimination in a work of art. Europeans considered Africa as 'dark continent' with people who don't have any religious beliefs or with any particular civilization. Being written during the African colonial era, 'Heart of Darkness' depicts racism, directed from the Europeans towards the Africans.

Signs of racial discrimination can be observed at various instances throughout the novel. The description of African men's faces as 'grotesque masks' at the beginning of the novel, is a way of matching them with the ugly and unpleasant things Marlow sees in Congo. (Achebe)

"They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast." (Conrad 20)

Conrad mostly addressed the natives as savages, and described them as animals who were forced to do hard labor. He referred them using derogatory language such as black fellows, savages, niggers, and 'them' and thereby treating them as just objects. "They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages". (23) 'black shapes crouched', 'they were nothing earthly now— nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation'. (25) These references are explicit examples of how the natives are treated in the novel. Marlow, the protagonist, never compares the people of Congo equal or similar to the Europeans. At times we can observe the

comparison made with animals rather than human beings, especially when he talked about the fireman, a 'savage' and 'an improved specimen'; "He was there below me, and, upon my word, 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." (59) In this way his racist attitude and expressions continue at various parts of the novel. It can be pointed out that Joseph Conrad's novel, 'Heart of Darkness' is a reflection of the racist attitude of the colonizers of that period of time.

CONCLUSION

Marlow, the protagonist describes different components of Imperialism in the novel like cruelty, hypocrisy, greed and racism as explained above through the characters of Kurtz and other Europeans. The inhuman devastation of the Africans and the brutal treatment of the natives by Kurtz by using his power are some of the imperialistic ways in which the Europeans exploited the Congo people. It is not just the cruel deeds but their audacity to even eliminate or kill the people shows how greedy and insatiable they were in plundering the nation. All these deeds were

done under the pretext of educating and civilizing the indigenous people of Congo but they ended up committing illegal and immoral acts that "real civilized" people couldn't do. Malcolm X wisely commented about "Imperialism as Western interests: imperialism, exploitation, racism and other negativisms." Joseph Conrad authenticates Malcolm X's quote in his novel 'Heart of Darkness' through the character of Marlow.

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