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Rethinking *Heart of Darkness* through Race and Racial Conflict

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Abstract: This research paper would like to examine Marlow's frailty as a narrator, his ethnocentricity and color consciousness and inability to comprehend inscrutable Africa that leads the author to support the colonizers against the Africans and how his approach is shared by Conrad as well. Conrad, in the colonial novel, *Heart of Darkness* has biasness for European colonialism, though the biasness is not so much conspicuous but ostensible, covertly and allusively maintained throughout. This study aims to focus upon Conrad's treatment of and race and racial conflicts. It also would like to explain the concept of race through applying the critical comments made by different critics and scholars.

Keywords: African; Conrad; Race; Racial conflicts; *Heart of Darkness*; Marlow.

1. Introduction

Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness* still bears the testimony of European Colonialism worldwide in general, Africa in particular. It is one of the texts that focuses on an investigation into the mode of colonial traits and a self-conscious reluctant denunciation as well as Conrad's inner vision towards colonial conflicts in the African World. For this purpose, this study wants to examine how Colonizers, making a trick in the name of civilizing African, get indulged in trade and commerce, and sent ivory back to Europe. Conrad and his protagonist, Marlow demonstrate their superiority on the native/innocent African nations. Conrad's critique of colonialism in the novel, *Heart of Darkness* is undermined by his racist sensual viewpoints and ambivalence regarding the colonizer's aim in African countries. In this novel, the novelist has a keen observation upon colonial rule and policy, which he has enabled to portray his major character, Marlow. Through this character, he wants to foster the age's tradition. This novel may be regarded as a replica of racial conflicts. Anyway, this study would like to examine how Conrad's racist, xenophobic, ethnocentric and jingoistic feeling pervade the whole novel, though there is no sign of human feeling for the colonized and oppressed Africans. It aims to look at Conrad's treatment of colonialism of his times.

2. Literary Criticism of Race

Although anthropological and biological scientists have discovered physical variation across human genes and race have been critiqued by critics, scholars and theorists in the light of structural point of view. More variation generally exists within a given race and community than has a permanency, on an average, between racial nations and communities around the globe. As we think still today of race as well as community get involved cultural trends rather than biological variance and features ranging from food habits and society to cultural issues. Race is to a greater extent a social construct because, with the passage of time, migration, and the subsequent biological mixing of races have enabled to make a racial and communal categorization an arbitrary state of human mind. (Murfin and Supryia, 2003).

Racial conflicts result in in very different experiences for the various groups kept distinct by racial stereotyping, race-like class and gender-must be taken into account when we speak or write about literary texts, especially while explaining the texts produced by authors representing different racial class in the human society and community. We can hardly think a race-blind critical comparison of Frederick's Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and another famous 19th -century American text that focuses upon race and racism, Mark Twain's *Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). With regard to more updated texts, a well-known African-American scholar as well as literary critic, Henry Louis Gates points out:

The black authors until more recently have had to fuse black linguistic and cultural conventions and traditions with those of the White Western literary bait with a view to reaching a world-wide audience and refute racial conflicts and marginality in society and culture. (Murfin and Supryia, 2003).

But very recent time, the imagination of race has been announced obsolete because post-Darwinian population genealogy makes a proof that it has no scientifically quantifiable foundations. Whereas in the 19th -century biological and sociological contradictions provided legal justification for racial conflicts and discrimination between

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nations globally, the advent of the genetic research in the late 20th –century radically challenges essential versions of racial big differences. New research strategies policed by modern scientists and scholars show that genetic variety within so-called racial class division is more diversified than it is between specified racial peoples in the globe. On the other hand, it may be identified by a white racist society as black is highly remarkable in so far as one is treated as black socially, communally, and institutionally. Since the 18th –century the concept of race plays a central role in the construction of a viewpoint of a national character, and for a second group of thinkers' race is not simply a fancy. Whether envisaged as a biological or a culturally determined construct, it remains a legitimate, real focus for critical, cultural, and literary genres, and precisely speaking, it marks a benchmark of racial conflicts. For the African-American author, Toni Morrison, for instance, 'black matters' and the people who invented the hierarchy of racism and colonialism while it was convenient for those peoples should not be the ones to explicate it away, now it doesn't match their expectations for it to have an existence. (Waugh, 2006).

In "On the Different Races of Men" (1775) Kant systematizes a monogenist approach to the question of different races which answered the polygamist skepticism about human differences being produced simply by climatic variation and the union of difference. (368) Races are the result of germs or seeds performed in the original pair which are actualized in response to climate and diet. This form of deviation comes about because of migration to more torrid or tropical regions, and is the type that is preserved over the generations. It may produce half-breeds, but it will never revert back to the original stock.

In *Physical Geography*, Kant comments:

The inhabitant of the temperate parts of the world, above all, the central part, has a more beautiful body, works harder, is more jocular, more controlled in his passion, more intelligent than any other race of people in the world. That is why at all points in time these people have educated the others and controlled them with weapons. The Roman Greeks, the ancient Nordic Peoples, Genghis Khan, the Turks, Tamurlaine, the Europeans after Columbus's discoveries, they have all amazed the southern lands with their arts and weapons. (Kant, 1997).

Race must be viewed as a social construction. That is, human interaction rather than natural differentiation must be seen as the source and continued basis for racial categorization. The process by which racial meanings arise has been labeled racial formation. In this formulation, race is not a determinant or a residue of some other social phenomenon, but rather stands on its own as an amalgamation of competing social forces. Racial formation includes both the rise of racial groups and their constant reification in social thought. (Rivkin and Micheal, n.d).

3. Racial Conflicts in *Heart of Darkness*

This potential research project examines racial conflicts so as to apply the race as well as racial conflict on Conrad's literary text, entitled, *Heart of Darkness*. It aims to highlight the real picture of race and racial conflicts of the age. There would be no difference between black and white around the world. Before our discussion on the issue of racism let us focus in brief on the western thought about Africa. Black Africans are regarded as uncivilized, primitive, savage, brutal, violent and lascivious. Shakespeare's 'dark' tragedy, *Othello* fails to keep a close eyes with the white community, because the protagonist is a black moor, an African descent. The white Iago sees him as 'barbary horse'. Caliban is dispossessed and enslaved since he is black and gullible and his mother African ancestry. The 19th -century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel makes his view that God's plan for humanity should be established through Europe. Daniel Defoe, in his colonialist novel, *Robinson Crusoe* depicts black people's cannibalistic activity in a remote island and shows how Crusoe like a colonial master teaches the uncivilized Friday his own language. This sort of idea make to encourage European conquest of Africa and other undeveloped nations. Europeans sense that the "Negro is the European in embryo. One of the European missionaries Albert Schweitzer who once worked in Africa said, "The African is indeed my brother, but my junior brother." A global famous novelist, D.H. Lawrence is held in high esteem as one of the pioneers of the 20th -century literature, but his idea also goes on the brink of racism. In *Aaron's Rod*, Lawrence made a proclaim that he could not do with folk who teemed by the billion, like the Chinese, and Orientals. Only vermin teem by the billion. Highest types breed slower. So, it is very obvious that non-Europeans and Africans are always portrayed by the pejorative terms. But in the novel, *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad describes African communities in an obnoxious way though from time to time he shows his sympathy for the native Africans.

Conrad's portrayal of Kurtz's African mistress reveals his racial bias and prejudice his line is "A wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman (*Heart of Darkness* 100). She is compared to a ghost. Conrad criticizes the dresses of the woman. Marlow depicts her, " She treading the earth proudly, with a sight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments, her hair was done in the shape of a hamlet innumerable necklaces of glass beads or her neck; bizarre things charms, gifts of a witch men (100-101). She is again described, "She was savaged and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent (101)".

African or Eastern people are often stereotyped as lecherous, passionate and sexually active. Marlow's description of Kurtz's African woman proves the point. She has been portrayed as wild and tempestuous A woman who is ready to gratify the last of a white man. Interestingly and curiously when Kurtz's European mistress or "intended" is met by Marlow he shows his remarkable commiseration for her real motive. He says, "She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering (117)". With this end in view Chinua Achebe (n.d), in an Essay

“An Image of Africa” comments that but the most significant difference is the one, which implies in the author’s bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other.

Conrad and his protagonist, Marlow display their racist attitude by referring African as cannibal. It is highly contentious whether there was any cannibalism in Africa in the 17th either 18th –century, or 19th -century. But in the Eurocentric discourse it is acknowledged that cannibalism was prevalent in Africa at that time. Marlow says about cannibal crew: “Fine fellows- cannibals-in their place.” Marlow also praises them for their restrains. He implied that those cannibals were of a better type. They did not eat human flesh, though they were hungry. That sort of condescending praise by Marlow is totally unwarranted and undesirable. As a result, Conrad or Marlow wants to establish their racial superiority on the black Africans. When Marlow’s helmsman is killed in the ambush, Marlow has to quickly shove his body overboard in order to prevent a cannibalistic orgy on the board. Though Marlow praises cannibals, in his inner mind, he knows that the cannibals can take human flesh any time. Africans are systematically abused, degraded, and dehumanized. One of the reasons for cannibalism to be to be prevalent in Africa in the western discourse was to justify Africans to be primitive and thus they had to be colonized and civilized.

Marlow or Conrad charges Africans with a devil worshipping. Marlow expresses their supremacy on the Africans. But his devil worshipping is blown out of proportion. Conrad is not oblivious of the fact that that was not confined to Africa. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and “Young Goodman Brown” strikes an example of how devil worshipping was going on in those counties. Human sacrifice is another propaganda that is initiated in the text by Marlow.

Conrad’s racism goes one step when his protagonist Marlow makes some abhorrent remarks about Africa and her peoples. Marlow comments that they were wanderers on a prehistoric earth Africa is told to be a primitive country. Marlow does not pause. He then maligns African people, and bemoans that the prehistoric man was cursing them, praying to them, welcoming them-who could express. Marlow, at that point, defends Africans by saying “No, they were not inhuman”. What is Marlow’s real purpose when human beings are being told that they were not inhuman? Actually, Conrad does not like to regard them as human being. Africans have been thoroughly depersonalized in the novel, *Heart of Darkness*.

Animal imagery is also applied to the native Africans. Marlow says that they howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces. In this regard, one can raise a very pertinent question about Conrad. Is he honest is his projection of African people? Do African people howl when they see new people? There is a systematic abuse of African people in the novel, *Heart of Darkness*.

Black people or Negroes are supposed to be subhuman and knee-bending races. Marlowe described his fireman between whites he had to look after the savage who had been his fireman. He was an improved specimen to look at him edifying like a dog in a parody of breeches and feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. Here again an African is deprived of full-human quality. One can have a knee-jerk reaction to see a normal human being compared to a dog. Again and again some uncivilized comments, like ‘savage’, ‘nigger’, ‘wild’, and ‘cannibal’ are used to depreciate the African people. We can realize that it is Conrad’s deliberate attempt to blacken African people through his narrative technique & style.

The idea of civilizing mission is also broadly hinted in the novel. The helmsman can be trained by a European and then, he can be turned into a fine human being. Without being educated or trained, he will remain ‘savage’. Marlow’s cultural hegemony or racial superiority is understandable in this case.

Africans also cannot be relative of Europeans. They display their snobbishness and arrogance. Marlow fails to recognize African helmsman to be his relative. At best Marlow can have “remote” or “distant kinship” with a black people. In the same way the Congo River is a symbol of ugliness, vileness and restlessness. The Thames appears to be superior to the Congo. It is very natural to Conrad or Marlow that a European river will be peaceful whereas an African river will be violent. This sort of discrimination and negative treatment of Africans have upset Chinua Achebe greatly, as we can see his globally well-reputed novel, *Things Fall Apart*. And, he is compelled to brand Conrad as “a thoroughgoing racist”.

Some critics want to prove some interesting similarity between Darwin and Conrad. In my opinion, Conrad is influenced by Darwin’s philosophy “The Theory of Species”. Darwin says in his book, “The main conclusion arrived at in this work namely that man is descended from some lowly organized form, will, I regret to think, be highly distressful to many. But there can hardly be a doubt that we are descended from the barbarian.” The 19th -century readers find no difference between barbarian and savage. Barbarian is the other to the civilized Europe. In that case, it is obvious that Conrad’s creation of Marlow will affirm their superiority.

Conrad’s harshest condemnation of economic colonialism is fully revealed through Kurtz. But Kurtz’s character can be interpreted in another way. This European goes to Africa and becomes hero or leader among the natives. The stereotyping idea that European will always be in the leading position has been established here. *Lord Jim* is Conrad’s another novel where we get the same sort of picture. Jim is the central character who also happens to be a white European goes to a distant Malay island and becomes ‘Tuan Jim’ there. He is a demi-god and saviour to the natives like Kurtz.

Conrad in the text shows that Kurtz’s mixing with the natives has made him barbaric. After witnessing their superstitious rites for a long time, he himself falls under their influence and returns to a state of savagery, barbarism and primitivism. He starts identifying himself with the savages and takes part in their customs and ceremonies. He presides over midnight dances. It concludes with “unspeakable rites”. What does Conrad want to say here? Is he

saying that African natives are evil and indulging in satanic practices? So his idea is if a civilized man goes and mixes with those people, he will be corrupted instantly. Conrad's depiction of degeneration of African natives is very clear. They are also shown as inferior race. This idea is similar to that of Thomas Jefferson. This third American President was against race mixture of black and white. He also argued that a distinction between white and black has been fixed by God. Race mixture would also create bitterness between the two nations.

One cannot be made corrupted if he does not want to. Kurtz is himself responsible for his having recourse to barbarism. Marlow suggests that Kurtz's urbanization is a symbol of his depravity. Indian critic [Frances Singh \(1998\)](#) makes an apt comment here. She says that from the little she can see of Kurtz's followers, thought there is nothing to suggest that they are depraved. Rather they appear as proactive simple and unselfconscious—far better specimen of humanity than the white people of *Hear of Darkness*.

Africans in the novel is somewhat taken as ambiguous. Africa is (looked upon) as Dark Continent, but its antithesis Europe is always Good and auspicious. A Bakhtinian critic in "A Practical Introduction to Literacy Theory and Criticism" by [Keith Brooker \(1996\)](#) comments, "Probably the most important opposition initiated in the text is that between Europe and Africa. Marlow consistently figures Europe as 'here' while portraying Africa as distant, dark and mysterious. Europe is also treated as the locus of contemporaneity, while African is consistently described as ancient, even primeval (228)". [Edward Said \(1993\)](#), in *Culture and Imperialism* also writes "... and of European geographical centrality is buttressed by a cultural discourse relegating and confining the non-European to a secondary racial, cultural, ontological status" (70).

Marlow's European racist stereotypes about Africa are abundantly clear here. They are found as 'black shadows', 'moribund shapes', 'bundle of actuate angles'. Their faces are like 'grotesque masks'. In a number of letters, Conrad insists that both novels *Hear of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* should be read together. So in the novel, *Lord Jim* also we get proof of Conrad's racist view. Non-Westerners are regarded as 'hyaenas', 'cattle' etc.

Africans have been undermined and belittled horribly by Marlow and they have not been given any voice. They are not allowed to speak. Europeans speak for them like Marx's idea that Eastern or African cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. An African can only have "a violent babble of uncouth sounds" or they "exchanged short grunting phrases". They are made unable to express themselves properly. Who knows, Marlow might also teach them language.

Marlow is very proud of European people's competence or skill. It is desirable to him that people of superior race will have efficiency and neatness in their work. Romans earlier conquered Britain, but Marlow condemns them because of their lack of efficiency. He says "What saves us is efficiency". On the other hand, Africans are not praised to be efficient. Rather they are disturber of peace. Chief accountant starts heating 'savages' who talk noisily outside his office that makes him incapable of doing his work efficiently.

4. Significance of the Study

The novel, *Heart of Darkness* written Joseph Conrad, signifies a difference between the Black and the White, i.e. the English and the African through demonstrating racial conflicts among them. This study examines communal riots of two nations; it also shows the novelist's negative attitudes towards the Negro through his mouth-speaker, Marlowe and himself as well. Conrad's novel is a model of colonial as well as racial conflicts around the world.

5. Moral Teachings

From the moral point of view, it can be stated that we should not expect racial conflicts, like the protagonist Marlow and the writer himself of the novel, *Heart of Darkness*. We want equity, peace, racism free and fair society in the world. Our motto is to establish a conflict and colonial free society in order that we can live in peace and happiness. There will be no difference between the rich and the poor; we are all human beings on earth. There is a poem regarding "Manush Jati" ["Human Being"] written by Satyendranath Dutta:

There is a nation on earth spreading everywhere
His name is Human Being;
He is brought up by a mercy of Earth
We are the company of Sun and Moon.
Our life is full of bitter cold-hunger and agony of thirsty
We all have an equal feeling.
.....
There is no difference between caste and pedigree
Who are the Rich and the Poor?
But we are the same pillar of Earth
The Earth begets her Spring in an equal space. [Translated Version]

From the poem stated above, we can see that the poet, Satyendranath Dutta tries to make us understand that there should be no difference between Human Being; he has same red blood and same physical organs; he shouldn't undermine by caste and race. Though the poem is not popular, but its inner truth is difficult to ascertain. However, we shouldn't hate the poor, rather we should raise our helping hands for everybody on Earth.

6. Conclusion

From our above critical analysis, we can understand that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is full of racial conflicts. From the very beginning to the end, Africans are dehumanized, depersonalized, demoralized and marginalized. They are presented in a very crude, offensive, objectionable and controversial manner. Conrad and Marlow are not different; they are deeply rooted in a same formulae. Conrad's narrator Marlow enjoys his full-confidence. Significantly, in the text, Conrad registers his contempt, scorn and venom for European imperialism in Africa, but he does not assert that racial conflicts should end so that natives can lead lives free from European domination. Europeans' racial superiority has been explicitly depicted in the novel, *Heart of Darkness*.

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