



PORTRAYAL OF IMPERIALISM AND MORALITY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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ABSTRACT

'Imperialism' as a political juggernaut has an old history since the British, the French, the Spanish and the Portuguese had employed it as a means to carry on trade and colonial expansion in the African and Asian continents. 'Imperialism' is one of the complex and controversial terms in the present century. It has acquired a varied range of meanings for the colonizer and colonized. Earlier it simply meant 'command or superior power' over other countries (Loomba 4). The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'imperialism' as "the fact of a powerful country increasing its influence over other countries through business, culture etc" (Wehmeier 649).

INTRODUCTION

According to Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), the term 'imperialism' refers to the attitude and practice of a dominating metropolitan center ruling distant territories (Said 8). Further, Said describes it as, "imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others" (Said 5). According to Edward Said it refers to anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the orient.



In the modern sense, the term ‘imperialism’ can be defined as a historical process. In the twentieth century, it has been associated with politics. Morally it has negative connotations. It has been related to progress and considered as an essential stage for the human development, which resulted in Europe’s global domination and destruction of the traditional values of life in other parts of the world. As Terry Collits opines:

Imperialism describes both a historical process and an abstract concept or category of understanding. It synthesizes various histories and practices that developed over several hundred years, and resulted in Europe’s global domination by the penetration and spread of the capitalist system into non-capitalist or primitive capitalist areas of the world (Collits 73).

Both the terms ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’ are related to each other. Imperialism is the result of colonialism. As imperialism is the highest stage of colonialism, it can be achieved through imposing economic, social as well as political dependency which ensures both labour and market for the European industry and goods. It can be achieved even without any direct political control. The changes in the government do not affect this imperial process. It is based on the economic exploitation. For instance, this kind of imperialism is practiced by the United States, which has an enormous military and economic power across the globe without any direct political control.

Europeans' journey to the different parts of the world ushered in new and different kinds of socio-cultural practices transforming the whole world. While colonial contacts have been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history, modern European colonialism is distinctive and by far the most extensive. It can be defined as the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods. Though the process of colonialism is not identical in different parts of the world, in each context it leads to very complex relationship between the colonizers and the colonized.

At a period when imperialism was a dominant political reality in world history, Conrad examined imperialism in his works closely. This paper analyzes the text in regard to plot/situation and characters to show how European imperialism can be related to greed for power, and wealth, resulting in moral degeneration. As Conrad says:

[...] they were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind (Conrad 5).



Profit and desire for further profit are the basis on which the expansion of the western empire is based. So, materialistic greed and hunger for power are the key aspects of imperialistic process. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad has captured this imperialistic attitude. These are not general - universal - evils. This is a historically specific immorality found in imperialism. Conrad looked at imperialism more dispassionately than other writers, as a dominant factor in world history and in the history of premier nations like England. Conrad portrays his characters as individuals of a progressive civilization imbued with imperialistic notion which gradually lead them towards their moral degeneration. While the protagonist, Kurtz is on a mission to Congo, to civilize or colonize the Congolese, his greed and desire for power impel him to acquire property and wealth perpetrating violence and terror. Rather than elevating the downtrodden Congolese, he subjugates them which suggest that imperialism is synonymous with subjugation.

Heart of Darkness is Conrad's most complex novella offering a brilliant fictional account of the savage extortion unleashed by imperialism in the guise of progress. The novel presents an account of a journey through the Congo, deep into the heart of Africa and into human nature. It is a story of an idealistic journalist named Kurtz, who has the power to corrupt the others and himself through his eloquence; of a man who makes a trip to the Congo to study the living conditions of the Congolese and suggest ways and means of ameliorating the plight of the natives. His idea is to write a book on his findings but as he reaches Congo, he finds the continent rich in material prospects. He forgets his mission and becomes a cruel white lord subjugating the natives and exploiting the rich resources through smuggling elephant tusks. In the end he totally ignores his earlier mission and falls critically ill and dies on his way back to the Europe.

As Edward Said has stated, the novel is directly connected with "the waste and horror, of Europe's mission in the dark world" (Said 23). Marlow, the narrator in the novel leads us to believe that the Africans cannot escape the force of imperialism and its concomitants like avarice, which contribute to moral degeneration. Marlow brings home the truth of the ruthless brutality of the white imperialism and the reality and truth embedded in the dark jungles of Congo and its natives. In the novel, Conrad projects the evil repercussions of imperial mastery - that of white Europeans over black Africans, their ivory, and that of western rule over the primitive continent. As Conrad says:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an

unselfish belief in the idea- something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.....(Conrad 5).

Kurtz, as the central figure of the novel, symbolizes modern European civilization and all that is bad about it. Kurtz had been partly educated in England. He is half French, half English, and somewhat German; that is to say, all of Europe has contributed to his making. He represents the shortcomings of European civilization, namely the lack of “restraint” in its material pursuits. His is a case of the moral degeneration of the highly idealistic and educated western man who easily yields to the temptations of possessing political power and power over the natives through acquisition of wealth by exploiting the impoverished and obedient natives.

As Raymond Williams says:

Congo is a world of darkness of many kinds, that this voyage explores, but among these kinds is the reality of colonial exploitation, the ambiguity of the ‘civilizing mission’ in to Africa-the reality of the criminality- of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa (Williams 140).

Williams rightly pointed out that the voyages of Kurtz and Marlow explore the reality of colonial exploitation, the ambiguity of the “civilizing mission” which brings Kurtz to Congo. He further says that among the many kinds of darkness that fill the Congo, the glaring darkness is that of criminality, inefficiency and selfishness of the civilized protagonists, which accounts for the protagonist’s moral degeneration.

In *Heart of Darkness*, in the beginning of the novel, though no empire building interest is evident, Kurtz, the protagonist embarks upon his honorable mission of ameliorating the Congolese. But, being basically a product of European imperialistic tradition and education, he is impelled by a desire to coerce, dominate, terrorise the Congolese to wield political power over them and to appropriate for himself wealth through the sale of tusks. This desire for power and wealth - this materialistic greed - is in truth Kurtz’s abandonment of his earlier highly benevolent purpose. This abandonment of a good purpose can be termed as his gradual deterioration of ethical and moral principles. In a sense, the novel sets out the gradual moral degeneration of Kurtz towards the end, as brought out by his words “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 59) This happens with other characters too, like the Russian. In this sense, we can say that the European imperialistic mission itself is the root of materialistic greed and immorality as it is characterized by uncontrollable hunger for wealth and power by subjugating the natives. In *Heart of Darkness*, these two are impulses make Kurtz and other characters forget their idealistic purpose and to rule over the Congolese.



In several situations Conrad often consciously or unconsciously presents difficulty to his readers. In his novels like *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostramo*, Conrad concentrated on self-deception of virtuous men, which led them to leave their pursuit of the good life. Here, the complexity is created by leaving his readers on their own to think about whether these deceptions are inherent parts of human beings or the result of pride or the notion of superiority formulated by western civilization. In such situations, Conrad has not given a single final conclusion. He has left it to his readers, which creates complexity. We are also not sure of the exact position or stand that he takes or adopts. We do not know whether he is with the English reader or against them.

Conrad's most famous account of his intention as a novelist is given in the preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897). He says,

My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel- it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything if I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts, encouragement, consolation, fear, charm all you demand – and perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask....(Berseth vii).

Thus, in his essay “Autocracy and War” Conrad keenly observed the way in which democracy is practiced under capitalism. He believes that it is not a real democracy but a pseudo- democracy. It is a medium to hide their original intention of material interests. He argues that,

Industrialism and commercialism – wearing high sounding names in many languages Stand ready, almost eager, to appeal to the sword as soon as the globe of the earth has shrunk beneath our growing members by another ell or so. And democracy, which has elected to pin its faith to the supremacy of material interests, will have to fight their battles to the bitter end(Watts, C. 61).

Conrad argues that due to imperialism the world has suffered a lot. It could have been a better place if there was no imperialism at all. Conrad believes that what the imperial nations do, with the help of economic power, military strength and their international rivalry for the imperial enterprise, is no different from what the so- called uncivilized natives do in their jungle. Conrad's views of imperialism had been influenced by the increasing trade rivalry between the various industrialized nations in the last few decades of the nineteenth century.



Despite the race, nationality, colour and so on all men seem to work for the common goal of material profit. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad shows the moral degeneration of Kurtz, who is the product of the whole Europe.

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