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JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS TO DEMYSTIFY
COLONIAL MYTHS

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Conrad's in his *Heart of Darkness* has been condemned as a supporter and defender of the imperialist views, and in other situations he is thought to be ambivalent, ambiguous and indecisive concerning this same topic. This paper aims at proving that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad employs strategy of introducing the long established imperial clichés to debunk them, demystify them, and to show how fake they are. This strategy is successful and convincing in depicting the cruelties that are caused by the power and authority of imperialism especially if we put this novel within its historical context; a time when imperialism and all of its byproducts were acceptable as practices of the White Man's Burden theory.

Keywords: Imperialism, atrocities, clichés, Congo, progress and efficiency.

Heart of Darkness, published in 1902: more than a century ago, by Joseph Conrad, still fascinates the scholars and occasionally referred, though debatable, as a sociological *treatise*. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author of *Things Fall Apart*, condemned Conrad's tale a work full of racism and stereotypes, which depicts Africa as "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe 252). Altogether taking an opposite stance, Cedric Watts appreciates this work a vitriolic attack against imperialism.

A debatable treatise on Imperialism, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, when analyzed in its historical context; a time when imperialism and all of its byproducts were acceptable as practices of the white man's burden theory, hauls out to demystify the colonial myths. Superficially or outwardly, this is a simple story largely based on first-hand experiences that Joseph Conrad acquired while journeying up the Congo River, as captain of a steamboat, during a six month Voyage in 1890. *Heart of Darkness* details the journey of Charles Marlow, the captain of a steamboat and also the protagonist, who travels up the Congo River to find a man, 'a very remarkable man', named Kurtz. However, the last words of Kurtz, 'a first-class agent', 'at present in charge of a trading-post, a very important one, in the true ivory-country' (33), who cried "The horror! The horror!" certainly exposes the unfounded and hollow claims of those involved in this business of civilization.

Though criticized for his ambiguous views on imperialism, Joseph Conrad, through Marlow who 'followed the sea with reverence and affection', tries to bust the myths associated with this business of colonization 'in the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower'(13).

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 other. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be get. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind. (Conrad 13)

Fascinated by 'a heavenly mission to civilize' and hankering after his passion for map 'resembling an immense snake uncoiled', Marlow, 'once turn fresh-water sailor', was 'appointed skipper of a river boat' under Belgium company, on the recommendation of a distant aunt. Marlow, got appointment swiftly, because of a 'glorious affair': one of the captains of the Company Fresleven, a Dane, 'the supernatural being' got infuriated on a bad 'bargain' of two black hens, hammered the chief of the village to death, and himself got killed in retaliation from the chief's son. The whites, burdened with 'work', that carry the tag that they have been sacrificing to carry the light of civilization to the natives, were actually so ill-tempered that power turns 'the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs' (16) into a brute. After the incident, no one touched the captain's body. The people had vanished fearing retaliation.

Mad terror had scattered them, men, women, and children, through the bush, and they had never returned. What became of the hens I don't know either. I should think the cause of progress got them, anyhow. (Conrad 17)

Concerned with changing the lot and ways of uncivilized, the company, immediately struck a deal with Marlow, 'in about forty-five seconds', who later on 'began to feel slightly uneasy' due to 'something ominous in the atmosphere' in company's office in Brussels: 'as arid as a desert', feels being 'let into some conspiracy'. Again, the medical examination turns out to a farce. The doctor measured his head with 'a thing like calipers'; instructed with a laugh to 'avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun' (22). The company, 'an over-sea empire' camouflages its operations, and projects its agents as 'something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle'(23) for 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways' (23); to please the world 'people at home' by their hollow promises and display of enchanting exhibits in its office:

A large shining map, marked with all the colours of rainbow. There was a vast amount of red- good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress. (Conrad 19)

Marlow, on appointment, sailed in a French steamer to arrive at a station from where he has to start upward journey. This steamer was entrusted 'the sole purpose of landing soldiers and custom-house officers' (23) on various toll points on 'the edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black...far away from a blue sea' (24) where 'the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb' (25). The 'monotonous grimness' of the work, callous attitude of the employer and inhumanity of colleagues is vivid as:

We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flag-pole lost in it; landed more soldiers— to take care of custom-house clerks, presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went. (Conrad 24)

During the sail, Marlow came across 'a man-of-war' who was shelling the bush, regardless of no signs of shed or enemy settlement at the target. Apparently, this act is a demonstration of their diligent efforts to reclaim the natives: though 'there was a touch of insanity in the proceeding'.

In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech-and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. (Conrad 25)

Company's Outer Station: 'three wooden barrack-like structures on the rocky slope', has been an abode of 'a boiler wallowing in the grass', 'undersized railway-truck lying on its back', 'more pieces of decaying machinery' and other 'wanton smash-up' apart from 'idiotic, aimless and ruthless devastation: 'heavy and dull detonation', not necessary, but in the name of progress. The station also houses natives 'brought from all the recesses of the cost in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air--and nearly as thin'(30). Contrary to Company's Chief Accountant's astonishingly elegant dress: 'a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and vanished boots' (31), 'everything else in the station was in a muddle', and the natives had been reduced to 'black bones' in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair walking:

Erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain. (Conrad 27)

The atmosphere of the station, so dismal, also seized upon Marlow, who earlier was full of missionary zeal; turned him into 'not particularly tender'. The spell of the company's 'high and just proceedings' creeps in, switches Marlow in its fancier of 'the work': illegal and unethical practices.

I've had to strike and to fend off. I've had to resist and to attack sometimes--that's only one way of resisting--without counting the exact cost, according to the demands of such sort of life as I had blundered into. 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. (Conrad 28)

After a short stay at Outer Station, Marlow left, at last, with a caravan of sixty men, for a two hundred-mile tramp' to arrive at the Central Station commanded by a 'chattering idiot' who 'inspired neither love, nor fear, nor even respect' but 'had served three terms of three years' because of 'triumphant health'. All people stationed here 'beguiled the time by back-biting and intriguing against each other'. The manager has been harboring a grudge against Mr. Kurtz: the best agent, an exceptional man, because 'next year he will be assistant--manager, two years more and...'(47) will probably replace the manager. The manager took 'advantage of this unfortunate accident': inner station in jeopardy due to illness of Mr. Kurtz, tore the bottom of the steamer, meant for Marlow's sailing to inner station, on stones, on the pretext of a trial run, and made it sink in the hope that 'the climate may do away with this difficulty' (57): Mr. Kurtz. It took three months for 'three carriers could have brought (rivets) all that was wanted to set that steamboat afloat' (51). The professional rivalry is set to take toll of 'a prodigy', as evident from the talk between the manager and his uncle, in-charge of Eldorado Expedition.

'We will not be free from unfair competition till one of these fellows is hanged for an example', he said. 'Certainly', grunted the other; 'get him hanged! Why not? Anything-anything can be done in this country. That's what I say; nobody here, you understand, here, can endanger your position. And why? You stand the climate--you outlast them all. The danger is in Europe; but there I left I took care to. (Conrad 58)

After sail on 'treacherous and shallow' water for more than two months: like 'wanderers on a prehistoric earth', Marlow was 'rather excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz very soon: comparatively. The stark reality exposes itself: the lulled natives travelling on board, 'engaged for six months', 'had brought with them some rotten hippo-meat, which couldn't have lasted very long'(72), 'had been given three pieces of brass wire, each about nine inches long' as wages to buy their provisions with that currency in riverside villages.

There were either no villages, or the people were hostile, or the director, who like the rest of us fed out of tins, with an occasional old he-goat thrown in, didn't want to stop the steamer for some more or less recondite reason. So, unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them. (Conrad 72)

Their approach to Inner Station faced an attack, which 'was very far from aggressive': really an attempt to repulse. The attack, stage managed by 'gifted Kurtz', through natives: dominated, hypnotized, and charmed by his power of eloquence, was an attempt to thwart his dislocation, and scare them away. His 'philanthropic pretence' which yielded to material interests: 'my intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—'(85), had estranged him from the magnetic chain of humanity. Born from parents- half-English and half-French, educated partly in England: whole 'Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz', was entrusted by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to draft a report, for its future guidance. The report, 'too high- strung', 'vibrating with eloquence', buzzes with striking hypocrisy; a practice among whites, who had been proclaiming to caring the burden to civilize the savages, reads as:

That we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them (savages) in the nature of supernatural beings-we approach them with the might of a deity', and so on, and so on. 'by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded', etc (Conrad 88)

The zenith of atrocities committed by whites: their just ways, in the guise of progress, made them, both colonizers and colonized, sub human, as portrayed through Kurtz. His 'appetite for more ivory had got the better of' him: more dangerous, more tyrant, and fidgety, and, intently, decorated his abode with rivals' skulls to signal his potency to both bosses and savages.

These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing-food for thought and also for vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes. (Conrad 102)

Besides this, Marlow felt himself bewitched, Achebe may be right, by 'that look' of Kurtz, feels himself conquered who 'was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking', and forged 'a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment' (89). Marlow, in a very candid way, was able to depart with 'one good screech' instead of using 'rifles' against the natives who 'don't want him (Kurtz) go'. Kurtz meets his end on the steamboat, after handing over a packet of papers, to Marlow, for safe custody. Kurtz 'intended to accomplish great thing'; through 'unsound method', to have kings meet him at railway stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere' (124).

To a true extent, Conrad, through Marlow, laments the moral degradation of the colonizers, effectively eliminating the difference between the civilized 'explorers' and the savage 'natives', demystified the colonial mindset for magnanimous pretensions, ignorance of the people back at home about the dark reality: succinctly and accurately summarizing the 'just proceedings' of 'White Man's Burden' by the simple phrase: "The horror! The horror!".

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