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**CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM AND *HEART OF DARKNESS***

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**Abstract**

This paper aims at considering Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in the backdrop of the recent criticism this canonical text has received. Consequently, my approach, herein, is directed at tracing the different dimensions in which the text has historically been read and interpreted. The multifaceted reception of the novel traverses diverse schools of criticism namely post-colonial, feminist, psycho-analytical, structuralist, symbolist and many more such. This essay, hence, tries to formulate a comprehensive understanding of the significance that this text continues to exert and receive. The wide spectrums of critical nuances that scholars over the last one century have attributed to the after-life of this book are a proof enough of the rich, paradoxical content Conrad had to offer via this text.

**Key-Words**

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Reception, Post-Colonial, Feminist Reading.





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Written in 1899 and published in 1902, Joseph Conrad's the most celebrated novel *Heart of Darkness* has had an immense share of criticism till date. By tracing the historical reception of the text, it becomes evident that it has been meted with anti-thetical responses, offering starkly contrasting perspectives and opinions. It is perhaps this duplicitous stance which continues to invite arguments on the novel's existential and epistemological complexity. As goes the argument of Allan Simmons<sup>1</sup>—“This double authority, whereby *Heart of Darkness* both reflects and transcends its historical moment, contributes to its enduring appeal...” (342). Moreover, labels ranging as wide as Conrad being a symbolist, moralist, modernist, nihilist, modernist, sexist, anti-colonialist, racist, have been attributed to him across the years.

Eventually, contemporary criticism attributed to this text, more or less, extends the tradition of opting varied standpoints with regard to the different schools of criticism. For any post-colonial critic, for instance, it is almost unavoidable to navigate Conradian texts without at least acknowledging Chinua Achebe's much acclaimed critique with regard to the presence of racial discourse and the unfair treatment that Africa and Africans are given within the novel. For instance, Benita Parry (1983) establishes that it is not history but fantasy that has impelled Conrad's depiction of Africans as “a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands

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<sup>1</sup> Simmons qtd. in Hume. Hume, Kiel. “Conrad's Heart of Darkness”. *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, Volume 52, Number 3, 2009. ELT Press. Web.

clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling..." (Conrad, 43). As Shimrit Peled (2010) also observes in "Photography, Home, Language: Ronit Matalon Facing Joseph Conrad's Colonial Journeys in the *Heart of Darkness*" that "the articulation of entry into the colony as an entry into the heart of darkness is embedded in Conrad's critical view of colonialism, which Marlow describes as an ideological blindness."

Ever since its beginning, the task of postcolonial criticism is aimed at uncovering biases, whether overt or covert, and challenging the façade of colonial respectability and English values. For instance, in this case, the task is akin to dealing with the "whited sepulcher", a Biblical structure that is superficially decorated, but rotten at the core, whereby "whited sepulcher" has become a much acclaimed symbol, along with Kurtz's sketch, his report, and his last words—"The Horror! The Horror!" (149). To this end, such critics would at times compare such a text with textual critical responses like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, thereby tracing contrasting structures and differences in the world-view of Conrad from these two authors. In this regard, if Achebe calls Conrad a "bloody racist", critics like Firechow<sup>2</sup>, adopting Frank Reeves' terminology, call him a "weak racist." (196). In fact, it is responses like this that have made *Heart of Darkness* land as a potential post-colonial parable.

In the name of 'philanthropy', 'progress' and 'enlightenment', the self-centered, individualistic propaganda behind the colonial project undoubtedly comes to the fore through Marlow's narration. The colonialists' behavior, as characterized by him, is "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly." (37). The mercenary motives governing this 'noble' scheme of colonialism, expose it to be a deconstructive endeavor unto itself, rather than a constructive one. Terry Collits<sup>3</sup>, for instance, expressing awe on the subject, writes—"The image of the skulls on poles works in complex and uncontrollable ways, and embodies meanings that provoke political and ethical questions. Minimally, it exposes a violent and sadistic underside of the civilizing mission." (Collits, 119). Extending the argument further, Collits elaborates the hollowness of the civilizing aspect with reference to Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1933), and his prophecies on psychological probing, looming large. In fact, a branch of psychoanalytical critics, including E.N. Dorall and

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<sup>2</sup> Peter E. Firechow qtd. in Hawkins. Hawkins, Hunt. "Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" by Peter E. Firechow- A Review." *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Winter, 2001), 196-199. South Atlantic Modern Language Association. Web.

<sup>3</sup> Collits, Terry. "Heart of Darkness: History, politics, myth and tragedy." *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*. Oxon: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Garratt Stuart perceives Marlow's admiration for Kurtz as functioning at the unconscious level. Consequently, the course of his adventurous journey, according to them, turns into a voyage of self-discovery, whereby Marlow comes to terms with his Freudian 'Id', Kurtz.

Terry Collits, opting the New Historicist stance in his reading of this classic—"Heart of Darkness: History, politics, myth, and tragedy"—diagnoses in Kurtz a Nietzschean hero, a rebel, the one who dares to follow his impulses with a complete rejection of all that is normative and conventional. Beginning with referencing the much-read Conrad's letter to his friend, R. B. Graham, in which he conveys the in-depth magnitude of the embedded meanings—identifiably anti-imperialist—in the narration, Collits quotes:

"...the idea is so wrapped up in secondary notions that You – even You! – may miss it. And also You must remember that I don't start with an abstract notion. I start with definite images and as their rendering is true some little effect is produced." (105).

This is followed by major mid-twentieth century commentaries on the text, including F. R. Leavis' argument establishing Conrad's standpoint to be revolutionary, yet 'apolitical', and Terry Eagleton's sure-short appraisal of Conrad's radical rejection of the imperialist ideology. Through Marlow, Conrad throws light on the fact that the so-called white-man's burden/mission is but to "make no end of coin by trade" (Conrad, 87), for colonialism is inevitably impelled by materialistic motives. The discrepancy between the actual scenario and the pretensions of Imperialists comes naked with the post-script of Kurtz's report which says—"Exterminate all the brutes!"

O. N. Burgess, in "Joseph Conrad: The Old And The New Criticism" arguing for a structuralist trajectory inherent within the narrative, stresses on the structural presence of three co-ordinates—Conrad, Marlow, and the frame narrator. Acting as a spokesperson to the author, Charles Marlow also works as a distancing device for Conrad, thereby enabling him to present a more scathing attack on European imperialism. While the frame narrator fulfils the tasks such as introducing Marlow to the reader, or at times offering an eagle's point-of-view on the events going on. Such a deployment of multiple narrators tends to problematize narration, whereby all, and particularly Marlow, are equally exposed to be wavering and unreliable. This in turn adds to the ambiance of ambiguity. For instance, we witness a first-person narrator who is himself craving for clarity amidst language-use that is metaphoric, symbolic, ambivalent, ironic, and, at times, straightforward. In the words of Collits, "Marlow... [is] a man of compassion, outrage, and insight, he is at once a sympathetic apologist for colonialism and also an exacting critic of it." (Collits, 111).

Furthermore, a queer line of criticism is also emerging as a dominant dimension of reading Conrad. Being framed under the context of Adventure Fiction, which is essentially a masculinist genre, the limitations with regard to heterosexual intimacy within such texts become obvious. Quite early on in the text, the idea of male brotherhood is established by the frame narrator. Moreover, women characters are denied narrative space and psychosomatic complexity. Such critics, eventually, relate the negative portrayal of women in *Heart of Darkness*, with Conrad's possible homosexual leanings. In "Male Intimacy in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and *Heart of Darkness*," Richard J. Ruppel illustrates this idea arguing—"If heterosexual desire finds little expression in the novella, potential and actual homosexual desire finds expression in several different ways..." (27). The most noteworthy amongst them being Marlow's obsessive aspiration to reach Kurtz, and Harlequin's assumed sexual rivalry with Kurtz's African Mistress. For instance, at a point, Marlow asserts "I knew [Kurtz] as well as it is possible for one man to know another." (Conrad, 84); also, how in order to describe the Harlequin and Kurtz's propinquity, Marlow explains—"They had come together unavoidably, like two ships becalmed near each other, and lay rubbing sides at last." (55).

Ruppel, thereafter, writes at length about the strengths of 'homosocial' relationships as are evident in Conrad's narratives. There occur two sub-sections in the essay entitled 'Between Men: Kurtz and the Harlequin,' and 'The Sexual Positions of Marlow and Kurtz', which are duly supported by healthy, yet exaggerated, arguments. Although the presence of homosexual undertones is patently discernable, the not-so-convincing textual quotes are cited from the text in Ruppel's essay and forceful interpretations are made to meet one's own end. Ruppel writes—"In its representation of the economy of desire, *Heart of Darkness* is therefore a seminal, transitional work that records male-to-male desire... at the same time that it registers and perhaps, even parodies post-Wildean, homosexual panic." (38)

Controversial, as it is, having invited a wide-spectrum of critical nuances regarding the rich, paradoxical texture of the themes raised, techniques executed, narration manipulated, the recent directions of criticism and scholarship on *Heart of Darkness* are proof enough for its future literal stature within the English cannon in the centuries to come. Critics, as discussed above, have started scrutinizing it from different ever-emerging strands of literary criticism and thus attributing all the more value, worth and significance to it.

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