

---

# Unraveling Joseph Conrad's Racist Ideology in *Heart of Darkness*

Sameen Junaid

Institute of English Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

**Email address:**

sameenjunaaid27@gmail.com

**To cite this article:**

Sameen Junaid. Unraveling Joseph Conrad's Racist Ideology in *Heart of Darkness*. *English Language, Literature & Culture*.

Vol. 7, No. 2, 2022, pp. 53-56. doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20220702.11

**Received:** February 13, 2022; **Accepted:** April 8, 2022; **Published:** April 25, 2022

---

**Abstract:** Joseph Conrad is a Polish-born English novelist and prose stylist who portrays the nature of evil, depth of human soul, his pessimistic approach in struggle and highlights the life of a modern man with isolation, chaos and moral decadence in his novel *Heart of Darkness*. This research paper sheds light on Joseph Conrad as racist who presents Europeans as heroes by hiding their villainous conduct through manipulative language, use of ambivalence and ambiguity which reveal his Eurocentric tendencies and cold heartedness against black Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. Moreover, this research also demonstrates that although Conrad exposes white men's insincerity, violence, economic motivation and deterioration of their moral values but at the same time, he projects Africans' image as innocent victims and stereotypes who are the accepters of unjust status quo rather resisters which reveals Conrad's ambivalence. Furthermore, the paper also explores that the glorified illusion of civilization and development of Africa upheld by white supremacists, in utter contrast takes the shape of contemptuous acts of loot, inhumanity and violence. *Heart of Darkness* is the story of human pitfalls and a disclosure of Europeans' exploitation, lust, and falseness of their ideals. Conrad reinforces Darwin's theory of "Survival of the fittest" through the depiction of Europeans substantiating racism and imperialism as justified phenomenon in Africa. After discovering Conrad's Racist tendencies, the paper also provides a struggle to bring change in the mentality of people through giving awareness on gender equality by confronting racist slurs based on skin color and opposing superiority and inferiority complexes by considering it as a mere absurdity mental phenomenon to judge human beings. It condemns Conrad's institutionalized prejudices against women and especially blacks. This, the paper comprises of an analytical approach towards Joseph Conrad's racist ideology in *Heart of darkness*.

**Keywords:** Racism, Ambivalence, White Supremacy, Eurocentrism, Imperialism, Superiority/Inferiority Complexes

---

## 1. Introduction

Marlow's story of a voyage up to the Congo River is the main narrative of *Heart of Darkness*. The narrator recounts the achievements of British explorers in a celebratory tone, calling them "knight-errant" of the sea, implying that such voyages served a sacred and higher purpose but their real purpose is imperialism, a nation's policy of exerting influence over other through military, political, and economic coercion. On the other hand, Marlow narrates his experience in Thames in an ironic tone. Throughout his story, distinctions such as civilized and savage, darkness and light, are called into question. The irony of Marlow's story is not as pronounced as in a satire, and Marlow's and Conrad's attitudes regarding imperialism are never entirely clear. Moreover, Marlow suggests that the mission of "civilizing" and "enlightening"

native peoples is misguided, they are so savage that the project is overwhelming and hopeless. Marlow expresses horror when he witnesses the violent maltreatment of the natives, and he argues that a kinship exists between black Africans and Europeans, but in the same breath, he states that this kinship is "ugly", distant and horrifying. His listeners' derisive grunts and murmurs suggest that they are less inclined to question colonialism or to view Africans as human beings. Marlow notices that 19 years ago, Romans first came to England, it was a savage wilderness to them. He imagines what it must have been like for a young Roman captain or soldier to come to a place so far from home and lack in comforts. This trail of thoughts reminds Marlow of his own experience as a "fresh-water sailor," when he captained a steamship going up the Congo River. He recounts that he first got the idea when, after returning from a six-year voyage through Asia, he came

across a map of Africa in a London shop window, which reinvigorated his childhood fantasies about the "blank spaces" on the map. Marlow gets a lot of information through watching the world around him and by overhearing others' conversations. Everything that is described in the novel is cloaked in darkness. Africa, England, and Brussels are all represented as gloomy and dark, even if the sun is shining brightly. Darkness thus seems to operate metaphorically and existentially rather than specifically. Darkness is the inability to see things but as a description of human condition, it has profound implications. Silence, slavery, inferiority and barbarity of Africans on one hand, and violence, oppression, superiority and civilization of Europeans validate Conrad as Racist. So, the aim of the research is to explore and unfold Joseph Conrad's intention to prioritize Europeans and belittle Africans. Thus, the paper analyzes the qualitative textual analysis of *Heart of Darkness* to unravel the mystery of Joseph Conrad as racist or anti racist.

## 2. Critical Analysis

When Marlow arrives at Congo River, he is exposed to the corruption of imperialism by witnessing the destruction and torture it inflicts on Africans. His journey is not only into "heart of darkness" geographically but also into human devilish nature as Marlow considers "the savagery, the utter savagery ... all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men". It also reveals the darker side of Western civilization as well, such as Kurtz says terrifically "The horror! The horror!". In the article "Joseph Conrad in the Light of Post Colonialism" by Daniel Vogel says that according to Chinua Achebe, Joseph Conrad mocks Africans and their landscapes as well [14]. Moreover, Nicholas Harrison explores that *Heart of darkness* revolves around "vagueness, incomprehensibility, jumbled chronology and Marlow's digressions" [7]. Marlow considers that it is Mr. Kurtz's crime that he rejects all the principles and moral obligations in mission of colonization as he says "could not appeal in the name of anything high or low", "a man kicked himself loses to earth". On the other side, he also admires him as Marlow believes Kurtz "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" which highlights Conrad's double policy as Willson Follett says that "Marlowe is of course, a subdivision of Conrad's personality". It is quite ironic that Kurtz is asked to make a report for "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" even though he is the one who is oppressive. Kurtz is the most brutal among all the colonizers, he places native heads on stakes because of participating in "unspeakable rites" and says "Exterminate all the brutes!" at the end of his document on civilization. Marlow supposes company's mission of civilization in Africa as mere facade but he also thinks that Empires cannot be build without the activities that he is witnessing in Congo. Visual and auditory images such as pilgrims' "gun fires", "broken", "leaped", "dodged", "possibility of sudden onslaught and massacre", "brutal instincts", "monstrous passions", "black things stood still", "deadly danger" suggest dread, senseless devastation,

inhumanity to man and imperialists' desire to dominate and torture Blacks. When Kurtz is near to death, Marlow says that "I had even like the idea of niggers to invoke him". Here, he satirically uses the word nigger which reveals Conrad's racist ideology of black inferiority. Thus, voicelessness of natives and hegemony of Europeans depict Conrad as racist.

Marlow exhibits the appearance of Europeans as "light starch collars, white cuffs, snowy trousers, clean necktie, varnished boots, hair brushed, oiled" while, for the depiction of Africans, he implies "black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom... dying like flies". So, the stark comparison between the representation of Europeans and Africans suggests the richness and poverty side by side the hollowness of civilization and development mission as well. The reality of European imperialism in Africa is based on greed and evil. He represents Africans as tragically passive. He sympathizes sometimes with black Africans and feels disgust by devastating impacts of colonialism, but Conrad does not appreciate people of any other culture than his own and he is unable to emancipate himself from the mindset of a colonizer. He criticizes the harmful system of imperialism by his usage of metaphors which reveal that colonialism neither give any benefit to colonialists nor the colonized countries as Brussels is depicted as "whited sepulcher", and offices of trading company as "a house in a city of the dead" and Kurtz as "an animated image of death carved out of old ivory". Furthermore, Africans are also victimized by Belgian exploitation as they are described as "shapes" and "shadows" that highlight the loss of personality and dehumanizing impacts of imperialism on rulers and ruled as well. Frances B. Singh in the article titled as "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*" suggests that it is "one of the most powerful indictments ever written... a direct, straightforward attack" [11] on colonialism. Conrad ironically draws the image of "Eldorado Exploring Expedition" as "their talk, however, was the talk of sordid buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it" [9]. It indicates the corruption in their profession and immorality in their intentions. Marlow on one side, describes the accountant "making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions" while on the other hand, the "sick agent lies on his truckle bed and fifty feet away Africans are dying" in the "grove of death." It explores the slavery and subjugation of Africans which stresses the shame on Europeans' development missionary work.

*Heart of Darkness* is an account of imperialism and a voyage into dark insight of civilized men that exhibits the remorselessness, human pitilessness, self deception and dishonesty of imperialists such as after examining Europeans' rule over Africans by his travel, Marlow says "They grabbed what they could get. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind .... 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". In an article "Joseph Conrad: Defender or Condemner of Imperialism?" by Abdullatif Al-Khaiat says that "Eloise Hay suggests, Kurtz is perceived by the Africans not as a god, but as a man backed by overwhelming force [2]. It declares Conrad's racism and favor of Europeans, that he depicts Africans as mind deadened. Natives think that Kurtz has God like power but he is monstrous to them and they have no power to resist. In an article "*Heart of Darkness*": "Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?" By Patrick Brantlinger addresses that "Conrad portrays the moral bankruptcy of imperialism by showing Europeans' motives and actions to be no better than Africans' fetishism and savagery" [4]. In addition to it, Conrad describes the rivers Thames and Congo with juxtapose images such as Thames with "tranquil dignity" and "sacred" while Marlow thinks that his travel towards Congo is like "travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" which reveals the association of Africans' land with madness, cannibalism, bestiality and darkness. Chinua Achebe in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's '*Heart of Darkness*'" raises a question on how can the celebration of dehumanization become a great work of art? Furthermore, he also highlights that Conrad "projects the image of Africa as the other world" [1] and he considers him "thoroughgoing racist" [1] because he has a problem with Niggers as represented by this reference "A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms". Conrad condemns imperialists' manipulation as he says "devil of violence, the devil of greed, devil of hot desire, lusty, red-eyed devil" but he is strangely "unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth" [13]. Russian trader is portrayed as a fool by Conrad who considers that surrender is the only way of survival as he says about Kurtz "you do not talk with that man, you only listen to him" which implies that the weak can only survive by yielding to the powerful. Natives accept the reign of terror of Kurtz without having the strength to confront him. He is a colonial monster who is thirsty for ivory, raids villages, steals ivory, shoots rebels and makes them an example for the rest. Kurtz is obsessed with his ownership as he says "my ivory", "my river", "my intended", "my station". At end of the novel, Marlow says "tranquil waterway" which exhibits Africans' silence over disastrous occurrences of racism and imperialism. Narrative voice and central positions are given to males and whites in the novel, on the other hand women and blacks are treated unfairly. He makes them naive who are ignorant of the dread of the world. He flattens them like Africans by stripping off their identity. They are functioning only as "blank slates". Kurtz intended is unable to look beyond except Kurtz as after his death she feels isolated and under in his influence, she says "all of his promise, all of his greatness, his generous mind, of his noble heart nothing remains". In addition to it, it also displays that Kurtz has colonized her conscious as well because she is only obsessed by him rather than thinking rationally on Kurtz' oppression and oppressive imperialism. It also explores Conrad's superiority/ inferiority and us/them complexes as he is unable to dismantle racism that supports colonialism.

Joseph Conrad on one hand, plays trickery with language to portray Africans as beasts while on the other hand humanizes Europeans in this political novella *Heart of Darkness*. It comprises of words which are unable to express reality due to uncertainty of language such as Marlow's language is complicated with the terms like "inscrutable" and "inexplicable", that denote vagueness and indecipherability. It discovers that the words have multiple layers of meaning which go farther from the plot. Marlow uses disparaging words to describe Africans, their personalities and rituals such as "unspeakable rites", "satanic litany", "brutal", "monstrous", "vengeful", "implacable", "inscrutable", "evil", "accursed", "hopeless", "dark", and "pitiless". Conrad employs these words so repetitively that it looks like Africans are surely tinged by these features that above-mentioned words reflect. He draws the picture of Africans' wilderness which unveils Conrad's exoticism as he describes them as "just limbs or rolling eyes" and "they howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces" which express the elimination of Africans' existence. Hunt Hawkins in an article titled as "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*" suggests that Marlow's attitude towards Africans is ambivalent. He belittles black by using degrading terms such as an English captain finds his fireman "comically pathetic" [6] as he says "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" . Edward Said in "Introduction to Culture and Imperialism" condemns Conrad's anti-imperialist irony that he confirms West wicked power but for him, there is no acceptance for African cultures. He creates ambivalence through language embellishment and "bombardment of emotive words" [11]. He uses negative adjectives to portray Africans such as "cannibals", "prehistoric", "enemies", "savage", "barbaric", "incomprehensible frenzy", "rebels", "fierce" and "demonic" while, he calls imperialists and whites as refine and civilize. An article titled as "Anti-Imperialism and Racism in *Heart of Darkness*" by Jana Lloyd substantiates that "Benita Parry points out, Conrad attacks imperialism by inverting the mythical black/white color hierarchy used to justify colonialism" [8]. "Reading and Resisting the Representations of Black Africans in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" by Victoria Cowan emphasizes that this novella is a "debilitating and dehumanizing discourse" [5] "in which the very humanity of black people is called in question" and "depersonalize a section of mankind [that] has suffered untold agonies and atrocities" (Achebe 346). The references such as "bush began to howl" "the tumult of angry and warlike yells. From the depths of the woods went out such a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair" illustrates Conrad's intention to present the picture of Congolese' with wilderness, frenzy and barbarity.

### 3. Conclusion

In a nutshell, real darkness lies not in Africans but in Europeans' heart which are merciless and spoiled by obsession of money. The satire is how immoral and cruel people like

Europeans, have a charge to make others civilize and educated. They are in lawless jungle according to Marlow who are cut off from the norms of civilization. Conrad does not give any agency or voice to Africans to speak for their rights instead he makes them innocent victims of White people's heart of darkness (44) as in the article "Racism and the Classics: Teaching *Heart of Darkness*" by Susan L. Blake suggests that "Africans do not speak, even among themselves" [3]. He believes that Europeans are racially superior than Africans. He places Africans at a lower level morally and humanly as well. Marlow's sympathy for Blacks is merely superficial as he is unable to do anything practically to save them. His behavior is loathing and abhorrent. According to John T. Flynn, an American journalist, "Imperialism is an institution under which one nation asserts the right to seize the land or at least to control the government or resources of another people" and this tyrannical situation is clearly revealed through Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

---

## References

- [1] Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*". *Massachusetts Review*, 1977, 251-261.
- [2] Al-Khaiat, Abdullatif. "Joseph Conrad: Defender or Condemner of Imperialism?" *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literature*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, 43-61.
- [3] Blake, Susan L. "Racism and the Classics: Teaching *Heart of Darkness*". *JSTOR*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1982, pp. 396-404.
- [4] Brantlinger, Patrick. "'Heart of Darkness': Anti Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?" *JSTOR*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1985, 363-385.
- [5] Cowan, Victoria. "Reading and Resisting the Representations of Black Africans in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, 27-31.
- [6] Hawkins, Hunt. "Conrad's Critique on Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*." *JSTOR*, 1979, 286-299.
- [7] Harrison, Nicolas. "Postcolonial Criticism. History, Theory and the Work of Fiction". Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.
- [8] Lloyd, Jana. "Anti-Imperialism and Racism in *Heart of Darkness*." *Inscape*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2003.
- [9] Maier Katkin, Birgit, and Daniel Maier-Katkin. "At the *Heart of Darkness*: Crimes against Humanity and the Banality of Evil." *JSTOR* vol. 26, no. 3, 2004, 584-604.
- [10] Misselbrook, David. "*Heart of Darkness*: A Journey into the Human Condition." *British Journal of General Practice*, 2012, 144.
- [11] Singh, Frances B. "THE COLONIALISTIC BIAS OF '*HEART OF DARKNESS*'." *JSTOR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1978, 41-54.
- [12] Spegele, Roger D. "Fiction as Political Theory: Joseph Conrad's '*Heart of Darkness*'." *JSTOR*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1972, 319-337.
- [13] Svensson, Morgan, and Erik Falk. "Critical Responses to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Sodertorns hogskola | Institutionen for kultur och kommunikation kandidatuppsats*, 2010.
- [14] Vogel, Daniel. "Joseph Conrad in the Light of Postcolonialism." *Yearbook of Conrad Studies*, vol. 8, 2012, 97-112.