Deconstructing ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ with Reference to Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness

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Abstract

The topic of the research paper is “Deconstructing ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ with reference to Joseph Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’ in which analysis drawn in considering the European as Self and African as Other. It is a matter of utter disappointment that this exclusion resulted in exploitation and subjugation. Hence there is a need to subvert this distinction. Reference from Joseph Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’ will be there in the paper.

The objective of the research paper is to deconstruct the notion of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ by using Derrida’s concept of ‘Deconstruction’. The findings of the research paper will be delineating with the text and tries to convey a famous saying that: “There is no centre, there is no margin” again from Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Colonialism, Mirror Image, Suppression, Subversion.

The word ‘Deconstruction’ (Derrida 34) introduced by French philosopher Jacques Derrida to demonstrate that any text is not a discrete whole but contains several irreconcilable and contradictory meanings; that any text therefore has more than one interpretation; that the text itself links these interpretations inextricably; that the incompatibility of these interpretations is irreducible; and thus that an interpretative reading cannot go beyond a certain point. In psychological terms, the Other is but the undiscovered territory in the Self. In the colonial enterprise, this territory of the unconscious is displaced onto another people who both allure and terrify. The colonizer, fearing to succumb to the Other, attempts to contain it through subordination, suppression, or conversion. These strategies of containment are designed to preserve the opposition and inequality between Self and Other that justifies the imperialist enterprise. The central trope of imperialism is what Abdul R. Janmohamed terms “Manchean allegory” (Hena 13) that converts racial difference “into moral and even metaphysical difference”. (13) This allegory characterizes the relationship dominant and subordinate culture as one of the ineradicable opposition. Although the opposing terms of the allegory change- good and evil, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality- they are always predicated upon the assumption of the superiority of the outside evaluator and the inferiority of the native being observed. Colonialist literature, as byproduct of the imperialist enterprise, necessarily re-inscribes the Manichean allegory either to conform or to interrogate it in an effort to move beyond its limits. As a result, colonialist texts take two forms, which reflect, respectively, two different responses: the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘symbolic’. The relation between the self and its image, which Lacan terms ‘the imaginary’, is one in which mirroring forestalls inter subjectivity or the interaction between two selves, each with its own distinct perspective.
In the imaginary colonialist text, the native functions as an image of the imperialist self in such a manner that it reveals the latter’s self-alienation. This self-alienation consists in the failure to recognize as inherent within the self despised attributes the imperialist projects onto the Other. Thus, the imaginary colonialist text adheres to a fixed opposition between the Self and the native, insisting upon the homogenous identity of the indigenous population and taking refuge in the ‘superior’, more ‘enlightened’ and more ‘civilized’ perspective of the dominant culture. Interpreted through the narrative perspective of Marlow, Heart of Darkness exemplifies the imaginary colonialist text. Marlow, the narrator of the novel himself is a European and already knew that Europeans are absolute and Africans are ‘Others’. He has a European consciousness and is narrating Africans as ‘Other’ without any knowledge of their culture and life so narrator lacked the faculty of intellect and reasoning. Marlow’s narrative is based on external sights and perception. He is not biased in the physical sense of real but in his self-consciousness level. He constructs Africa not in the form of real but in reference to ‘White and Black. Bookman called Heart of Darkness as “a symbolic picture of the inborn antagonisms of two races, the white and the black”. (Ray 167) Marlow’s approach towards natives reflects Conrad’s outlook i.e. admiration overshadowed by the prejudices of the period in which he wrote. He uses the word ‘Nigger’ and even ‘Cannibals’ for Africans and said that they were prepared to eat the dead Helmsman and later the blacks of Inner Station. Marlow attempts to deny the power of the Other he fears by resorting to stereotypes. “Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance...two bronze figures, leaning on tall spears, stood in the sunlight under fantastic head-dresses of spotted skins, wearlike and sand till in taturesque repose’”(168). These words eloquently express the fact that these men have been reduced to mere objects, squeezed out of life through hard labour, and then discarded. Just as setting offers a picture of devastation, so the condition and posture of men suggest ‘a massacre and a pestilence’. Marlow feels that he has entered into a gloomy circle of some inferno. Throughout his account, Marlow both denigrates and overestimates the power of women. Through synecdoche, Marlow reduces the women he sees in the waiting room of the Belgian shipping company to “one fat and the other slim”. Marlow’s stereotypical descriptions of both women and natives serve a strategy of containment that enables him to deny both their importance for him and his affinity with them. But if one sees the novel at the symbolic level, the text deconstructs the notion of ‘Being and Other’. Edward Said wrote in ‘Culture and Imperialism’ that “Colonialism is chiefly about political and economic relationships, some of which may or may not continue after a state gains independence. The post-colonial era, on the other hand, is about the intrusion and colonization of minds and ideas”. (Said 56)

Conrad presents colonialism not merely as a political and economic venture but as an offshoot of the individual’s power and possessiveness and even as an epitome of man’s capacity for evil. The anonymous narrator sees the voyage as a glorious adventure, at once an expression of England’s greatness and a means of adding to it. His is not aware that by calling English conquerors ‘hunters for gold or pursuers of fame’ he associates them with the Roman invaders who “grabbed what they could for the sake of what was to be got” (Conrad 45) and with all the characters in Marlow’s tale who take part in the colonialist enterprise for selfish purposes. Nor does he realize that by pointing to the two symbols of that enterprise, ‘the sword’ and ‘the torch’, he is actually referring to brutal force to the negation of native culture by the so-called light of civilization.
Similarly, Marlow’s aunt has an idealistic view of colonialism and is pleased with herself for helping to send Marlow to Africa as one of the ‘workers’ and as an “emissary of light” (113). She subscribes entirely to the view that the motive behind colonialism is to civilize the conquered peoples, ‘weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways’. Her conception of the colonialist intention emphasizes the ideals of duty and service that inspired many to the colonies but also expressed their prejudiced view of the colonized: “Your new-caught, half-devil and half-child” (114). When he reaches the Company Station, he is deeply shocked by what he discovers. His suspicion that he will be acquainted with a “flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly” (114) is immediately confirmed when he comes upon the dying Negroes. He finds that no effort made by colonialists to understand the natives whom they exploit in various ways. Although he does not convey his reaction in indigent tones, his vivid imagery heightened in its effect by a sinister background of aggressive, futile activity shocks the reader into an awareness of the effects of the White man’s presence in Africa. Even worse is the degree of dehumanization that Marlow witnesses; black slaves, each having “an iron collar on his neck” (115). Their ribs and joints visible “like knot in a rope”, “ghostly figures of natives-over-worked, starved and too weak to move” (116). The fact that the natives are punished with an outraged law and the blacks dying of disease and starvation were all brought in all legality of time contracts only points the hypocrisy of the white man’s enterprise.

In the novel Kurtz epitomizes the reality behind the myth of colonization and whatever is carried on in the name of ‘progress’- its hypocrisy, its corruption, its unrestrained lust, its greed, inhumanity, the discrepancy between the percept and the practice, its self-deception ad its capacity for evil. Kurtz comes to Africa as a civilizer, as an “emissary of pity, and science and progress” (120) but in the solitude of jungle he is consumed by the wilderness outside and within himself because of the lack of self-restraint. In a place untrammelled by trappings of civilization and devoid of external checks the beast in him overtakes his socials self and turns him into a megalomaniac exploiter who is prepared to kill anybody for a little ivory. Instead of turning his station into “beacon on the road towards better things” (122), he gives in to the “fascination of the abomination” (122). Kurtz started duping ad frightening the natives and abrogates to himself the power to destroy all those who are different from him. This helps him to conduct a three-level brute exploitation of the natives-biological, economic and cultural.

As Marlow travels from the Outer Station to the Central Station and finally up the river to the Inner Station, he encounters scenes of torture, cruelty, and near-slavery. At the very least, the incidental scenery of the book offers a harsh picture of colonial enterprise. All along Marlow tries to understand the ‘otherness’ of the natives of Africa and takes pity on their inhuman suffering. His sympathetic observation serves to explode the myth of the “white man’s burden” (123) which is nothing, but a colossal hoax that hides the greed, violence and lust for power, and corruption of the exploiting colonialists. His Congo experience has shown him that colonialism is at bottom only an elaborate arrangement for exploration. Conrad wrote in his “Last Essays” (Hudson 34): “If I am to believe that colonialism was undertaken for the cause of democracy, it is enough to make you die laughing”. (34)

In his novella Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad takes a deflationary attitude towards the idea of progress. He does so by revealing that this idea is a mere social construct, meaningful only within the narrow and particular context of the European and, more importantly, Euro-centric society. By placing Marlow, his framed narrator and a finished product of European
progress, Conrad is in effect performing a thought experiment. This experiment is meant to reveal what, if anything, distinguishes Marlow, the “emissary of progress” (Conrad 45), and therefore of the rational and comprehensible, from what Marlow calls “the incomprehensible, which is also detestable” (45), in this case the African continent and its people. But his narrative also renders the distinction between the Self and the Other relative. He emphasizes that England, too, “has been one of the dark places of the earth” (45). As Marlow’s narrative brings the destructiveness inherent to the colonial presence in the African continent to the fore, the activity of the colonists appears as mindless, irrational and absurd as the untamed nature which surrounds them. As Carola M. Kaplan writes, “...the fundamental difference between Self and Other disappears and, with it, the unbridgeable gulf between men and women and between savage and civilized that sustains the power structure of western civilization” (Hudson 67). Thus, by revealing destructiveness inherent to the colonial enterprise, Conrad shows the emissaries of progress to be no different than their Others, the inhabitants of the “dark places of earth” (Conrad 126), and therefore renders the idea of progress itself meaningless with which Europeans entered Africa and start dominating their culture and ideology.

As Bill Ashcroft points out, “the discourse of colonialism obscures the underlying political and material aims of colonization. The dominant culture has the power to construct the world in a particular way under the guise of knowing it and this construction rests on unexamined assumptions”. (Ashcroft 78) Levinas also puts the same thing that it is a desire to know about the invisible ‘other’ who is not known to the ‘Self’. Conrad has stated that it was always his desire to explore parts of the world still unknown to the west. “It was 1868, when nine years old...while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself...When I grow up I shall go there.” (Conrad 34) It is this desire which made Europeans to come into contact with Africans as they find their civilization and culture very exotic.

Through Marlow’s experiences, Heart of Darkness reveals the wide gap between the aspirations of the official doctrines of colonialism and its actual practices. Marlow’s observations upon his arrival in Africa illustrate that any endeavor to devise an ethical basis for imperialism is destined to fail. Kurtz gives him a moral shock because he impersonates imperialism's will to expand its domain over the earth and all its creatures. Kurtz's motives and his fate in Heart of Darkness are deeply representative of the European who went out to govern colonies and were almost automatically given the ‘rightness of a god’. Heart of Darkness is a critique of European colonialism with its imperialistic impulse toward profit, exploitation and destruction, and of complacent Victorian ideas of civilized progress, with the journey into the interior exposing the savage and primitive which lie beneath the veneer of European culture.

In the novel, Marlow’s conquest of Africa and his narration clearly represents the darkness inherent in the hearts of Europeans who came to Africa as traders but started exploiting the natives. Savagery present in Africa symbolizes the absence of the motive with which they entered the place i.e. to civilize the uncivilized people. Africa seems to be a medium to throw light on the darkness of the heart of Europeans. Conrad questions the accepted differences and distinctions between civilized and primitive, whites and blacks, educated and illiterate and being and other. He constructs that the blackness present in Other is nothing but the mental creation of Self. Self feared of being taken over by Other so Self started dominating the Other. The novel is thus a representation of the real Other which is the Self hence diminishing the distinction
between the self and the Other. He contests to reveal that if the Africans would look mysterious to the English as invaders, then the European invaders must look as incomprehensible to the Africans. For Decostructing the disparity between ‘Self’ and ‘Other, the title of the novel is significant. “Heart of Darkness” symbolically signifies the darkness not inherent in the heart of Africa but Europe. Portrayal of Africa as a dark continent by European writers deeply conveys their insecurity, motive to be superior. Europeans created an image of Africa that was the perverse opposite of Europe’s – its mirror image. Europe’s general superiority would, by comparison with and in contrast to this image, be self-evident. Europe’s own idea of itself was thus predicated on its image of Africa. This means that each Other is a Self and each Self an Other, depending on one’s perspective. This does a lot to undermine the absolute distinction between the Self and the Other essential to the imperialist ideology.

Works Cited: