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Biased Presentation of Racial Binary Distinction in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract:

Racial discrimination plays a crucial role in colonialism. The binary distinction between 'civilized' and 'primitive' is used for hierarchical categorization. The colonizers always try to construct themselves as 'self' and so the colonized has to remain in the position of 'others' and this process of 'othering' helps the colonizer to control over the colonized. The practice of classifying human beings into different groups using their physical characteristics leads to racial binarism where the white gets the 'superior' position and the black 'inferior'. This racial binarism can be found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where the Africans are treated as animals and savages by the white imperialists. In the name of enlightenment, a bloody business of profit is continued by the white Europeans who take themselves as educated and civilized human beings and the Africans as cannibals or less than human. Marlow, the narrator of the story, sometimes unconsciously reveals his racist behavior which helps the critics to accuse Conrad as racist.

Keywords: Race, binarism, othering, superior, inferior, imperialism.

My aim in this article is to highlight how the process of 'othering' is going on through racial discrimination in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Coined by Gayatri Spivak the term 'othering' signifies the process of creating 'others' by the imperial discourse. Imperialist discourse always continues its process to construct its others in order to confirm its own reality. In postcolonial theory the binary separation of the colonizer and the colonized is established by characterizing the colonized as the 'other' and the colonizer as the 'self'. This usage of the term in postcolonial theory is rooted in the works of the psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Jacques Lacan. This process of 'othering' continues in various ways and one of the most noticeable ways is racial discrimination between the colonizer and the colonized. The term 'race' is used to classify human beings into physically, biologically and genetically different groups. The binary distinction of race was adopted by the imperialists for utilizing both of their purposes: dominance and enlightenment.

For this discussion it needs to mention, at first, some major ideas about racism. Classic anthropology used physical characteristics like skin colour, hair type etc to differentiate world's various peoples. In the post- Darwinian late nineteenth century this

type of anthropological classification reached its climax. Such anthropological activity was at its zenith in the post-Darwinian late nineteenth century. While the attitude of racism has long historical origins, the term dates from the 1930s.

Ania Loomba speaks about the two broad tendencies in analysis of race and ethnicity:

The first, which stems from Marxist analysis, can be referred to as the 'economic' because it regards social groupings, including racial ones, as largely determined and explained by economic structures and processes. Colonialism was the means through which capitalism achieved its global expansion. Racism simply facilitated this process, and was the conduit through which the labour of colonized people was appropriated. (124)

She further comments that "The second approach, which has been called 'sociological', and derives partly from the work of Max Weber, argues that economic explanations are insufficient for understanding the racial features of colonized societies" (124). The superiority of the white race, clearly implied that 'the black men must forever remain cheap labour and slaves'. Thus we can say that race is socially imagined rather than biological realities.

In Europe, two propagators of scientific racism in the nineteenth century were the French philologist historian Ernest Joseph Renan and the French journalist, orientalist and diplomat Arthur de Gobineau. Renan observed races as different species, divided by skin colour and language: the 'white' Caucasian species was superior, but it was also divided hierarchically into Aryan Semitic language families, the Aryan language family being superior. Gobineau, called 'the father of racism', opined that, in spite of their common origin, human beings were separated permanently into types by a cosmic cataclysm that occurred soon after man's first appearance. According to him, race was the determining motor of history, and history only existed through the activities of the white race. To him, all civilization of the world – including Egypt, India, and China – have been initiated by Aryans.

W. E. Du Bois who was a main figure in the campaign of Negro nationalism opined that the issue of colour line is the problem of the twentieth century. Kathleen Kerr mentions the ideas of Du Bois:

... the concept of race, conceived as the Manichaeism of 'white nation' and 'non-white others', was, from the beginning of the history of the United States, the key official defining characteristic of the population, and the basis upon which privilege continued to be established in his lifetime, despite of the abolition of

slavery and the reconstructive process. He described this dual perception as 'double consciousness' in the Negro race. (374)

Then Kerr says that "If an essential factor in the development of modernity had been the concept of race, in Du Bois's view it was precisely race that would become a problem for metropolis of late modernity" (374).

The systematic practice of racial discrimination can occur only when racism has become institutionalized. According to Tyson:

Institutionalized racism refers to the incorporation of racist policies and practices in the institutions by which a society operates; for example, education; federal; state and local governments; the law, both in terms of what is written on the books and how it is implemented by the courts and police officials; health care, which can be racially biased in everything from the allocation of research dollars to the location of hospitals to the treatment of individual patients; and the corporate world, which often practices racial discrimination in its hiring and promotion despite whatever equal-opportunity policies it officially claims to have. (361)

A racist society continues its psychological programming to make the people of colour to believe in the superiority of the white people and internalized racism takes its origin from this psychological programming. The victims of internalized racism start to think about their inferiority and wish they were white or looked more white. In the black community there exists a racial discrimination against those with darker skin and more African features. This is called intra-racial racism that comes from internalized racism.

Heart of Darkness is a novella of Joseph Conrad written in 1899 and published in 1902 in *Youth: A Narrative*, with two other stories. The narrator, Marlow, tells the story to four friends as they wait for the tide to turn on a ship in the Thames estuary. Marlow started off his journey to Congo by a French steamer. After arriving at the company's station Marlow saw the colonial exploitation in Africa. The black natives were treated as animals and tortured ruthlessly. At the company's station he met the company's chief Accountant who mentioned about Kurtz to Marlow for the first time. After fifteen days of journey on foot Marlow arrived at the Central Station. The manager informed Marlow that he had received rumours that a very important station was in danger and its chief Mr. Kurtz was ill. In this station also he became the eye-witness of colonizer's injustice towards the innocent natives. From the brick maker he got much information about Kurtz whom he called a universal genius. Kurtz was not only a good ivory collector but also fabulously silver-tongued man. In the interior of Africa the natives considered him as a god-figure.

After reaching the Inner Station Marlow saw the Russian who said that the natives did not want Kurtz to leave them. Then Marlow finally found Kurtz. When Marlow started to depart with Kurtz a crowd of natives including Kurtz's Intended crowded on the river bank. Then the manager's boy brought the news of Kurtz's death and his last words were "The horror! The horror!" (239). Then he returned to Brussels and met Kurtz's European mistress who was in mourning dress for Kurtz's death.

Chinua Achebe's article "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" has an epoch-making effect in the whole world of literary criticism and theory. There are many critiques against Achebe's opinion. But one cannot deny the importance of this article which opens a new era in Conrad's criticism. According to Achebe, "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world', the anti-thesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (206-07). By showing the Africans as beast Conrad wants to prove the Europeans as human.

According to many traditional critics, in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad exposes his anti-colonial views and he criticizes the colonial activities of Europeans in Africa. But some critics like Chinua Achebe opined that Conrad was not much against the imperial advances in Africa. Though Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* with quite a liberal mind as well as humanitarian attitude, because of his almost unconscious bias to British ideology on imperialism and colonial expansion his notion of Africa remained conventional and stereotyped. It was a popular belief that Africa is a land of the savages, the dark, uncultured tribal people who observed ghastly rituals – a country of impenetrable darkness, of cannibals, and fierce animals.

This fantasy about Africa was popular throughout a long time. Conrad's contemporaries also presented this tradition in their writings. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887), both published before Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, vividly presented the fascinating but fierce landscape, the wild life, and tribal society of Africa. In Edgar Rice Burrough's *Trazan the Ape Man*, published in 1914, the same literary tradition is found to continue. So Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* was published between these two books, must have been quite aware of the image of Africa and in *Heart of Darkness* he has only contributed to this mostly fantastic image of Africa.

I can show many examples from the text itself where we can find Conrad's racist attitudes towards the Africans: "It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares" (Conrad 152). Marlow refers to his journey as a "pilgrimage" and this fact that his mission is one so pure as to be blessed by God. In reality, his object is far less noble, but he deceives himself into this comforting lie:

...but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the out-raged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes started stonily up-hill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages. (154)

These slaves, chained together and indifferent to their surroundings, know only their labour. This passage underlies the absurdity of colonization for Marlow; in his view, such beings could never be considered dangerous enemies: “They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom” (156). This picture is a cruel effect of cruel imperialism. Mistreated and overworked slaves are left to die on their own. They are not given food, care and medicine, and are left to die outdoors. They are treated inhumanly, and because of this, Marlow sees them as less-than-human: “What a row the brute makes!’ said the indefatigable man with the moustaches, appearing near us. ‘Serve him right. Transgression – punishment – bang! Pitiless, Pitiless. That’s the only way. This will prevent all conflagrations for the future. I was just telling the manager....” (170)

The so-called pilgrims’ goodness and their noble mission come into question here as they pitilessly beat the black man blamed for the fire. They have no compassion or feelings for his suffering; his whimpers are shown here as a “row” made by “the brute”. They treat the man like an animal, as if he will only learn his lesson from repeated beatings:

More than once she had to wade for a bit, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing. We had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for a crew. Fine fellows –cannibals –in their place .They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face: They had brought along provision of hippo-meat which went rotten, and made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils. Phoo! I can stiff it now. (184)

Marlow treats the cannibals well, as they work hard which stands in contrast to the lazy activities of the pilgrims. He calls them “fine fellows” (184) but only if they are “in their place” (184). In other words, they are workers only and they should not forget that they are also forced to give up their cannibalistic nature to put their employers at ease .Thus, native Africans lose a great deal of their own culture and dignity when put under the system of colonialism:

He began with the argument 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 as 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. From that point he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. (208)

Kurtz always believed in the goodness of imperialism. He believed that the white man could bring civilization and enlightenment to the black Africans. But to Kurtz, this is only possible if the white man plays the role of a so-called god. Kurtz wants a utopia not of equality between the two races, but of a peaceful domination of the white men over the black. Marlow, hypnotized by Kurtz's eloquence, becomes enthusiastic about this possibility.

In front of the first rank, along the river three men, plastered with bright red earth from head to foot, strutted to and fro restlessly, when we came abreast again, they faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce river-demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendent tail – something that looked like a dried gourd; they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some Satanic litany. (235-36)

Their native language seems hostile to the Europeans and thus they consider it evil - a "Satanic litany" (236). Apart from Marlow, the accountant also shows his racist behaviour in this novel. The death of the slaves means nothing to the accountant. He has become insensitive to the loss of human life.

Achebe points out the difference in the attitude of Conrad to the two women, one Kurtz's African mistress and the other his European Intended. In Conrad's novel the African mistress is described as: "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress" (225-26). On the other hand, Kurtz's European Intended is described in different words: "She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning. It was more than a year since his death, more than a year since the news came..." (246-47). The African mistress is presented as wild, savage and passionate but the European Intended is an ideal woman – devoted, docile, saintly, mourning even after a year of Kurtz's death. In the whole novel the natives are never given any opportunity to speak. Likewise this African mistress is only described by Marlow as a symbol of wilderness, she gets no chance to express her feelings verbally. But in sharp contrast the European Intended speaks of her devotion, love and care for Kurtz to Marlow frankly. So, this contrasting representation of these two women may clearly emphasize the theme of racism in *Heart of Darkness*.

It should be noted that Marlow watches the intolerable suffering, the miseries and agonies of the innocent Africans but he never protests against their exploitation. He never thinks that the very heartless imperial activities in Africa should be stopped. In *Heart of Darkness* the image of Africa as presented by Conrad is quite similar to the 19th century division of the world into the 'west' and the 'rest'. The western world always tries to set up its antithesis. Africa, Asia and other colonial countries provide Europe with an effective anti-thesis. The image of Africa as presented in *Heart of Darkness* may thus be found to be a part of the image created by the 19th century Europe for its own imperial and colonial interests.

An attentive reading of *Heart of Darkness* will discover that Conrad uses many adjectives to describe the west as well as the Africa. And these adjectives are not same in both cases. For describing the Europeans he uses all the positive qualities, namely 'light', 'civilization', 'white', 'fair' but in the case of the Africans he uses only the negative adjectives as 'dark', 'savage', 'black', 'wild' and even 'cannibal'. From this use of contrasting adjectives we can declare that Conrad being a white man always expresses his abhorrence towards the Africans. He consciously or unconsciously tries to prove the western as superior race. This usage of different adjectives signifies Conrad's underlying desire to make hierarchical categorization. Here I can refer to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin:

In this respect, 'racism' is not so much a product of the concept of race as the very reason for its existence. Without the underlying desire for hierarchical categorization implicit in racism, 'race' would not exist. Racism can be defined as: a way of thinking that considers a group's unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, casual way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and which on this basis distinguishes between 'superior' and 'inferior' racial groups. (199)

At the central station in one evening a grass shed full of calico, cotton prints, beads and other articles caught fire. The blame was put on an innocent native and he was ruthlessly beaten by the white colonizers. Marlow saw him, later, for several days, sitting in a bit of shade looking very sick and trying to recover him. It is noteworthy that in spite of seeing this ruthless beating Marlow never forbids his fellow members not to do this injustice. And when he observes the sick and ill native he takes no positive step to help him. In this perspective there may come some questions regarding his attitude. If Marlow sees a white man being beaten by a native ruthlessly what will he do? Will he remain silent or will protest against this injustice? It seems to me that he obviously will go to help his white friends. Then I may question why don't he go to help the native African? Probably, the answer lies in his racist attitude. Marlow's old aunt who helped him to go to Africa expects him to be "something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle" (149). She thought that Marlow travels to Africa to educate the native Africans. But Marlow knows it very well that the white Europeans are nothing but

colonizers. Their aim is not to civilize but to make profit. They collect ivory from the natives by frightening them. And he is also a member of this ivory-business and he knows that he is not travelling for altruistic ends. He never can have altruistic behaviour towards the native Africans because of his white skin and Eurocentric mentality.

Not only in *Heart of Darkness* but also in another novel, *Lord Jim* Conrad tries to make a clear distinction between the west and the rest. In the former, Marlow uses the word 'them' for dissociating himself from the natives. The word 'them' is used in *Lord Jim* also significantly. In this context I can mention Frances B. Sing's comments in the essay "The Colonialistic Bias in *Heart of Darkness*" that in *Lord Jim* Marlow repeatedly tries to differentiate between "one of us" who are superior and morally honest people of the world and "one of them" who are inferior, dishonest and cowardly people of the world.

Thus, Conrad in these two novels marginalizes the natives as the 'other' and tries to bring the westerns in the centre. So, it can be said that every white man has a superiority complex which helps them to ignore the Africans as black and inferior. In a conversation with C.P. Sarvan, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o accepted some views of Achebe's criticism but he also felt that Achebe had overlooked the positive aspect, Conrad's attack on colonialism. But Wa Thiong'o also observed that though Conrad castigates Belgian atrocities, he is much milder in his criticisms of British imperialism.

Though Achebe calls Conrad a thoroughgoing racist I can conclude my discussion by saying that in spite of being a racist Conrad spills the beans of dark sides of imperialism. When Marlow gave his reference to the city of Brussels he used the phrase "white sepulcher" (145). The phrase means a place which is inwardly impure, full of voices, corruption, evils but outwardly looks righteous and full of happiness. Marlow emphasized on the greed of the Belgian conquerors who were mad after money, more money. After observing the first version of colonial exploitation at the company's station Marlow said that he had seen so many devils of greed, of violence, of hot desire but now he was seeing the "devils of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (155). So, Marlow does not hesitate to reveal the negative picture of British imperialism and it proves his anti-colonial attitude. To him the European colonial practice seems a greedy business. Thus, his conscious mind is always aware of the bad sides of imperialism. But his unconscious mind sometimes expresses his racist behaviour towards the Africans. Thus, in Conrad we witness the amalgamation of racist and a little bit anti-colonialist attitude.

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