
Annihilation of Identity in *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* portrays the inhabitants of Congo from non-human perceptions. Charles Marlow's observation and analysis of the citizens of Congo are based on prejudiced viewpoints and pre-defined white archetypes. The chief motive of the Belgians was to justify the native as ferocious and collect the ivory from Congo. Natives did not recognize the worth of tusk while the white men ship it to Europe to brand ornamental articles. This representation of the Congolese annihilates the identity of the native, depicting them as barbaric to accomplish their trade motive. Marlow's narrative attempts to commodify the natives and display the white people as the embodiment of civilization. Human beings treat non-human behavior to the inhabitant in the designation of civilization. The narrator's perspective is instrumental to the authorial voice in abolishing the human identity of the people of Congo. His white racial lens constructs the nature and character of the citizens. The general world of the white as represented by Marlow delivers the people of Congo a forceful encyclopedia of education and civilization. Then develops cultural dominance comprising reason, intelligence, and wisdom. The forceful negation demolishes the real identity of the natives and hence creates a racial verdict. The firm outlook of the white Europeans displays the vivacious demarcation for exploitation. Hence, the text establishes a world of hierarchy among the people living in the same geographical location. The depiction of predisposed attitude and deficit positioning for ivory trading thrashes natives. Such doings cause revolt in the world.

Keywords: *annihilate, humanity, ivory, native, racial supremacy*

Introduction

Heart of Darkness, published in 1889, displays Conrad's review of the African country of Congo from the white racial standpoint. The historical context shapes the narrative of the novel. Marable, M. (1984, p.8) recounts that "[b]etween 1882 and 1903, 2060 blacks were lynched in the United States." His graphic account presents the plight (p.9), "In 1890, 63 percent of all black males were agricultural workers, 22 percent were domestic servants, and 14 percent worked in transportation, communications, and or manufactures." His arguments on background shaped the discrimination and the time when blacks yearned for equal access, "Racial conflict generated by competition between blacks and whites for dwindling job opportunities and access to decent schools, homes, and recreation facilities in the central cities." (139). The term racism, Fredrickson's (2002, p.5) views, first came in the usage later "in the 1930s when a new word was required to describe the theories on which the Nazis based their persecution of the Jews." Then, these groups began to be antagonistic "to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or people toward

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another (1).” A large part of Congo was under the regulation of Belgian King Leopold II. The Belgian government had established an office along the river Congo to trade and export ivory to Belgium from where the government sold it to different nations of Europe for manufacturing ornaments. Jago et.al (2011, p.68) analyze the novel from a colonial viewpoint. He contends that the novel “Heart of Darkness itself, explores the impact of colonial domination on both the oppressed and the oppressor with readings that ask complex questions about the influence of colonization on national politics and personal identity.” He assesses that colonizers try to shape the colonized nations based on their role models. Western white people formulate double revelation while observing the people as Tyson (2011, p.211) comments, “White racism is fueled by the myths that people of color are less intelligent, less civilized, less moral, and even less attractive than white people.” She further maintains that “all African Americans are alike and have no individual qualities.” The clash of cultures is the result of the white visitors’ way of life and exploitative mode of thinking towards blacks. Hochschild (2016, p.6) presents the view that during the 1960s political differences would “disturb” them but in 2010 “partyism, as some call it, now beats race as the source of divisive prejudice.” His argument is that race is the burning subject of the public during the early years of this century.

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* displays the dynamics between the white society and the black natives due to the former’s treatment of the latter as savage and barbaric. It portrays how the white people exploit the blacks, dehumanizing them and reducing them to a state of savagery. The narrative of the white degrades black individuals to the level of a commodity. The novel laments the loss of humanity, rationality, empathy, and compassion. Marlow embodies the massive loss of humanity, who is instrumental to formulate the discourse on human exploitation. Despite being an outsider, he claims as cultured and denigrates the natives as uncivilized and brutal. The speaker employs the established power discourse to forcefully create a mainstream vision for the native. The societal world of the white provides a directory of cultural superiority marked for a reason, intellect, and cleanliness. In sharp contrast to this, the black is uncivilized, savage, poor, and promiscuous. Therefore, the narrator annihilates native people relegating them to the level of animals and objects.

Critics on *Heart of Darkness*

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* draws the attention of critical viewpoints due to its diverse layers. The novel welcomes the theoretical and critical interpretation from critics because it expects manifold explanations. Kinney, M.A. (2010) argues that the novel is about the “human psyche” that depicts the “struggle between awareness and madness and madness is evidence in both Marlow and Kurtz.” Amara, A.B. (2019, p.174) analyzes the narrator’s shock because of the surrounding incidents, “Fragmentation in Marlow’s narrator is the result of a psychological crisis that is caused not by direct exposure to violence, but by witnessing someone else’s trauma.” As Marable (1984, p.211) gives noteworthy conclusive observation “a racist/capitalist state can co-opt a small segment of the oppressed community.” Critics observe the novel from narrative version as well as racist but the ultimate point is to demolish the identity of the natives,

Observation of fierceness central to the internal fear of ferocity for Marlow. Gerai, U.F.M., Horizonte, G. & Gerai, M. (2019, p.28) critically commented on the novel as “tantalizingly provoking text, as well as unique proto-postcolonial and modernist novel.” Their observation is

two-sided: political and literary. Kuehn, J. (2012) comments that “It tells a gripping story: an outer as well as an inner journey into the center of Africa (the “Dark continent”) and the depths of human mind and soul.” For him, the novel is a physical and psychological journey. Abu-Snoubar (2017, p.9) discourses that authorial interest was against colonial power, “Conrad in each episode starts by flickering the privileges of imperialism, just to shock us with how ugly and inhuman it can be. He attempts through this technique to shake the long-established beliefs about the good intention of the imperialist power.” For him, colonialism and its maltreatment to the natives deserve the subject for discussion.

Critics have valued the novel for the madness of the narrator and characters, invisible trauma faced by the storyteller, journey into the center of Africa, study of the human psyche, and voices against imperialism. However, they have done slight justice to the novel. Annihilation of the humanity of the native people of Congo is the main thematic idea that lurked throughout the whole text. The narrator becomes the spokesman of the author and questions on the identity of the people in the light of color and race. The narrator follows the footsteps of the writer to crush the citizens.

Research Questions

People in Congo are freedom fans, enthusiastic, and lovers of the wilderness. However, the way they are represented by the outsiders is debilitating and disparaging: Marlow and Kurtz had a mission for developing one-sided discourse by systematically debasing the routine activities such as clothing, talk, and physical structure. The injustice meted out to the natives of Congo emanates from their sterile heart and barren viewpoint. The main objective of the paper is to indicate annihilation of native human identity of the people of Congo by the outsiders through textual evidences. The present article poses the question to answer the objectives: Why was Marlow devoid of common sense on his comments of the native of Congo? Marlow’s narrative does not hint at the philanthropic viewpoint. This aspect raises other questions: Does the novel present the decline of humanity? What logic promotes such perspective? How did outsiders come to hold their view? This paper answers these questions through the pieces of evidence from the novel. The procedure is logical analysis and interpretations of the text.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study that justifies the logic from the sources of information drawn from critics’ views and textual information. The primary source is the text *Heart of Darkness* whereas the critics’ views and visions are the secondary sources.

Analysis and interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* focuses on the destruction of humanity and the perpetrator is the racial prejudice of the white narrator, Marlow. The novel is replete with an intricate story involving conflict with citizens, deceptive hazards of the jungle, vicious barbarity, and even cannibalism. But overdue with it lies the larger connotations with the work is obliquely

concerned: social, psychological, and cultural superiority of whites to the blacks and the brutal action to the latter. It also raises the issue about man's nature to man and one's treatment of the other in the designation of civilization.

Charles Marlow, an English, and Mr. Kurtz, a German are the two outsiders who try to shape the views and visions of the world towards the native people of Congo. The former is the narrator who is supremely significant to shape the perceptions. He models the beings around Congo through his outlook. The narrator fails to see the beauty in the wilderness rather he exposes desolation. Misselbrook, D. (2016) infers that "the book is the ultimate misanthropic road trip." European cultures, their language, dress, etiquette, and tradition become the judging limitations for the narrator. Shange, S. (2019, p.3) points out that "the performance of racial analogy is both cathartic and politically strategic." The associating characters in the novel are deliberate. Marlow says, "Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages- precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink ... They must have been dying like flies here" and likens the human beings to the ants, "A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants." (378-379). He links the people with the insects in the same ratio. The phrase 'civilized man' refers to the narrator himself. He stresses that the natives do not have anything enjoyable to eat. He also links the death of human beings with bugs. He witnesses the people of Congo from the viewpoint of others. In the words of Shange "This mode of racial solidarity cannibalizes Black." That's why human beings did not charm him but the animals did as he says in the novel, "The snake had charmed me" (373). His love for the snake and hate for the human beings is because "black flesh is always an excess, uncivil and marked by its incongruity" (Shange, 4) for the whites. This marks the loss of humanity. The instrumental thought emerges because of racial biasedness as Fredrickson (2002, p.139) remarks, "racism remains a major international problem at the dawn of the twenty-first century." The point of view of the whites has the callous ethnic undercurrent.

The novel sets the scene of the beauty of the Thames: "the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint." (369). During childhood, the beauty of "rivers and lakes" would captivate the narrator. Human beings, however, repelled him. He presents the weird nature of the old woman, "She seemed uncanny and fateful." During his description of the doctor, Marlow comments "He was Shabby and careless with ink-stains on the sleeves of his jacket and his cravat was large and billowy under a chin shaped like the toe of an old boot" with his "feet in slippers, and I thought him a harmless fool." (376). The prejudice seeps through the description, "He was an unshaven little man in the threadbare coat like a gaberdine He does not tolerate the dress-up of the people. The conversation between the doctor and Marlow shows a sense of conflict. The doctor does not tolerate the nature of Marlow and asks, "Ever any madness in your family?" This comment irritates him and feels, "very annoyed" and then immediately Marlow asks "Are you an alienist?" (376). This conversation hints at the sense of irritation between the narrator and the doctor.

Marlow compares the dress and body structure with the toe of an old boot. He erases the real identity of the doctor utilizing his ugly dress up not the quality and character. He does not have a human eye because he analogically presents them comparing mostly with either insect-like ants or with an animate object like a rope. He finds rhythmic beauty in the jingling sound of an iron collar, not in the innocent voice of the people and their loveliness in the wilderness. He states; "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 with a chain whose bights swung between them rhythmically (clinking) linking" (379). The chained beings charmed the narrator. For him, the dark human

beings are gloomy figures. Natives, for him, were “[b]lack shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks” and this “was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.” (380). Does this expression contain the sense of humanity? The answer is no. Not even a sign of palpable hope is visible in him. The hunger and disease charmed Marlow as they are black shadows of disease and starvation for him. He elaborates; “They were dying slowly-it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now -nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom” (380-81). These sights highlight Marlow's adverse attitude to the black native people of Congo. His callousness and triviality towards the black natives have been shown through this excerpt. Marlow, the narrator, likes to execute a predetermined set of beliefs as literary discourse, thrashing the identity of black people. The stereotypical sets of beliefs trivialize them to the level of creatures and inorganic objects.

However, Marlow's perception of the cunning and greedy white exploiter is positive. He designates the physical get-up of the chief accountant of the station, “I met a white man in such an unexpected elegance of get up.” (381). He eulogizes the bodily structure saying that “he was amazing”. Moreover, he presents the principal accountant through the positive lens, “I respect his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair.” (381) He highlights the elegance and get-up of the white man even though he is a greedy agent. Marlow thinks this man to be a miracle. However, Marlow comments on the black as “Mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons”. The same type of white men is “very hospitable and festive.” (383). His presentation deserves importance because leader's words are significant as Hochschild (2016, p.15) remarks, “When we listen to a political leader, we do not simply hear words, we listen predisposed to want to feel certain things.” The remarks of Marlow designate his inclined feelings that stamp the image on the mind of the natives. The nearness that natives show annoys him, “I was surprised to see how near they were-right under me. I could have spat upon their hats.” (393). For him, the jungle is so dark green as to be almost black. The sun is fierce and the land seems to glisten and drip with steam Marlow adds saying that going up the river Congo was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world. He speaks of the empty stream, the great silence, and the impenetrable forest in which the air is warm, thick, heavy, and sluggish. Marlow says, “Going up the river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest” (394). Marlow's perception of the country, hills, rivers, and trees is one-sided and biased. For him, there was “no joy in the brilliance of sunshine.” (394) He does not see heart-touching beauty in the panorama, freshness in nature, and joy in the breath-taking environment. The freshness and wilderness no longer enthrall him because the place belongs to the black. The obliteration of humanity is pervasive throughout the novel in Marlow's assessments.

The chief commodity which the Belgians found worth their pains was ivory. Natives did not know the value of ivory while the white men collected ivory and ship it to Europe where it could profitably be used for the making of numerous ornamental articles. Ivory dominates the thoughts of the Manager of the Central Station, the thoughts of the brickmaker, the thoughts of the several white agents. Marlow does not present the devilish picture of the white colonizers whereas he darkens the picture of the native people degrading them below the level of human beings. Marlow presents the white manager's confession that “I am not disclosing any trade secrets” (413). Though he talks about how the agents take ivory and sent it to Europe, his narrative subtly

excludes the slave-trade and many other illegal activities because he is also the representative of white colonizers. Marlow's inhuman treatment of the people is further justified through the following extract: "Suddenly round the corner of the house a group of men appeared, as though they had come up from the ground. They waded waist-deep in the grass" (414). He is preoccupied with the superior feeling. Using adverse and coldhearted presentation, he rationalizes the native as the underground objects "they had come up from the ground". A normal person never treats anthropological beings as subversive objects. Moreover, they are not the barbarians of prehistoric time but Marlow repeatedly does so to project the west as the vanguard of human civilization.

The exploitative discourse continues to weave through Marlow's narration, "Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance, flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest and near the river two bronze figures leading on tall spears stood in the sunlight under fantastic headdresses of spotted skins, warlike and still in statuesque repose" (415). The adjective 'dark' for the human shapes distorts the natives. The other phrase 'two bronze figures' validates the process of making the existing human beings deceased figures.

Joseph Conrad's portrayal of Mr. Kurtz is equally important. The chief accountant of the transaction company gives the information of Mr. Kurtz calling him a 'remarkable man'. He is an agent for the white. He shows the sense of possession of things repetitively, 'my ivory, my intended, my station, my river'. From how he talks, it would seem that Mr. Kurtz had been a man of sound views and an enlightened outlook upon life. Once, he came to Congo, he became savage. In his description of Kurtz, we find the white concept of civilization. It is not the European white colonizers who should develop the parameters for civilization and savage. The people in Congo have their customs, tradition, and civilization. Kurtz represents the western colonizers' commercial mentality, their greed, their dehumanizing objective to the natives, and their hypocrisy. He also represents the white people's desire to subjugate the natives. But, at the end of the novel, he utters the words, "The horror! The horror!". This anguish is the result of the internalization of the treatment the whites did to the blacks. Therefore, the novel works to disseminate racial prejudice creating a one-sided and partial attitude towards the black community as a whole to batter humanity. This is the strategic narrative for the formulation of principles to dismantle the actual identity. It demonstrates the guided discourse that values the narrator's view as the ultimate view of civilization.

Conclusion

For Marlow, the natives of Congo are disgraceful and wretched. Marlow's this racial snobbery is a sign of inhuman treatment to humanity. In *Heart of Darkness*, he paints the public as savage in every aspect from the way they dress up to their diurnal routines. Charles Marlow, the narrator of the novel, compares human beings either with animals and insects or with inanimate objects like rope, boot. This is the narrator's callous and petty attitude shown towards the native people of Congo, who are unrestrained. He has developed white people's parameters to judge the native people. Like other western agents, Marlow distorts the black people to justify the rhetoric that the white west is the model for civilization. He employs the power discourse a narrative that common people begin to accept as legitimate. What is equally crucial about the novel is the nature and character of Mr. Kurtz. He has developed a sense of complete ownership of ivory. He embodies western people's voracity and profitable outlook. The parameters of civilization that the narrator

puts about the way of life, dialogue, and dress-up are biased logic. Therefore, the novel formulates a narrative that demolishes the true identity of the inhabitants of Congo.

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