

# A Marxist Reading of Heart of Darkness: Exploitation, the Main Tool for Colonial Profit.

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## ABSTRACT

Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* has been read and explored many times from psychoanalytical perspective. Individual psyche was the prime concern for the critics that hides the real focus of the novella that creates human experience-the economic systems that structure human societies. The objective of this article is to throw some light on this aspect of the novella where human beings have no other identities except that of a colonizer and colonized. The study aims at examining Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* from a Marxist point of view where colonialism being the prime concern pivots the action. Joseph Conrad explores the nature of colonialism and sarcastically shows the terror of it: for him colonialism is a savage and brutal process which denies human empathy. Throughout the novella, the effects of colonialism are visible with tooth and nail. This is a critical study on how colonialism tends to exploit people and deprive them from basic human needs. Due to capitalistic profit interests, the imperialistic powers of Europe exploit the Africans, as a result a stark class division between the rich Europeans exploiting the poor non-Europeans is created. Exploitation becomes a tool for the colonizers to expand their territory. So, this article concentrates

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on how the novella *Heart of Darkness* raises questions about the colonization itself by ironically drawing attention to its flaws.

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## INTRODUCTION

The novella *Heart of Darkness* is a famous work of Joseph Conrad, and it was published in 1902, just at the end of the Victorian age and the beginning of the Modern age, thus it belongs to a period of change- the change from the Victorian values to the ideals of modernism. This short novel has become one of the most discussed and celebrated text in post-colonial literary studies. The interest of many critics has most often been on its psychological features. But, this essay will explore that the novella has also got many features of Marxist theory.

Marxist literary criticism views literary works as reflections of the social institutions from which they originate. According to Marxists even literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function, based on the background and ideology of the author. From Conrad's life it is found that his native land was conquered by imperial powers and that may be the reason- why he empathized with other subjugated people. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad portrays blacks very sympathetically and their plight tragically, and refers sarcastically to, and outright condemns, the supposedly noble aims of white colonists, thereby demonstrating his skepticism about the moral superiority of the white men. Also Conrad had a fascination for voyages and new lands as the narrator Marlow. He himself had visited Africa and seen the stark realities of colonialism and many of his entries in his Congo diary resemble the incidents in *Heart of Darkness*.

## DISCUSSION

The action of the novel is set against the backdrop of an Empire that shows the scramble among the Europeans for African ivory in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. This historical setting of the novel reveals the problems of imperialism and shows man's vulnerability and corruptibility. In this respect this work is a part of the realistic tradition in literature and it is typical in its realistic representation of the historical conditions prevailing in its age. In this way the novel satisfies Marxist scholar Georg Lukacs' theory of art given in Terry Eagleton's book *Marxism and Literary Criticism*:

"A 'realist' is rich in a complex comprehensive set of relations between man, nature and history; and these relations embody and unfold what for Marxism is most 'typical' about a particular phase of history. By the 'typical' Lukacs denotes those latent forces in any society which are

from a Marxist viewpoint most historically significant and progressive, which lay bare the society's inner structure and dynamic."

The theory of Marxism sees the society as a divide between two classes- the rich capitalist class or the bourgeoisie and the poor exploited class or the proletariat. So, Marxists view the society as a common ground for exploitation by the so called affluent class. For this reason, Marxist writers consciously condemn the callous exploitation of the poor by the capitalist and at the same time advocate a classless society. A critical examination of the novella would reveal that class plays a very important role in the work, and Conrad sees the natives as constituting the oppressed class who are at the mercy of the capitalist class represented by the Director of the companies, Kurtz and his cohort. In the novella, the bourgeoisie live in splendor with excess of money to spend: they own the capital, hence the term capitalist. A close look at the characterization would also reveal the disparity between the rich and the poor in the novella. As the novella begins, the director of companies is introduced as the owner of a pleasure merchant ship. Others are mere seamen and workers. Even Marlow has to go through a particular ritual in order to be employed. The director is in affluence. He is in control of 'so many millions'. Marlow describes that his hands are plump. This is clear evidence that he does not work, workers do not have supple hands; where as the natives are starving and dying of disease and over work. There is no even distribution of wealth in the society of *Heart of Darkness*: exploitation runs throughout.

Marxists say that in the capitalist society the rich become richer and the poor become poorer and as a result social inequality is created and the poor are continuously oppressed and exploited. *Heart of Darkness* is a tale of oppression and exploitation of the poor natives. The ivory which is actually the property of the poor natives, gets slowly transferred to the rich colonizers. As a result they become richer and richer while the colonized Africans becomes poor and poorer deprived of their ivory and even deprived of food and other basic needs of life.

Marxism also says that capitalistic society leads to slavery and Marxists are against it. In the novella, it is found that the natives are not even regarded as human beings; they have been turned into mere objects of slavery. The natives are not in any way compensated or paid for their labour. The means of production belongs to the colonizers. The natives are not workers who are paid but forced labourers who gather all ivory for Kurtz and other ivory collectors. The profit is enjoyed by the capitalist and not the proletariats. There is nowhere in the novella that the natives gather ivory for themselves. They only toil day and night to enrich the oppressing colonizers. There are several cases of physical oppression and victimization in the novella. One instance of victimization is when a native is shot and is laid at Marlow's feet. He tries to talk but dies before he could get his words out. Typically of a sadist capitalist, the Chief Accountant also dismisses the cries of a dying native as annoying.

Consciously or unconsciously Conrad decries the oppressiveness of capitalism through Marlow, his chief narrator. According to Marlow, the

act of imperialism in the Congo is nothing but 'great demoralization of the land'. The Congolese society in the novella truly portrays the oppressive occupations of capitalism, which has become the bane of the people. Marx theorized that when profits are not reinvested in the workers but in creating more factories, the workers would grow poorer and poorer. This is what happens in the novel- resources are robbed and the natives are mercilessly exploited.

Another Marxist issue in the novella is education. The Europeans mainly went to colonize people by saying that they are going to civilize the natives. To become civilized, it is needed to get education but the poor natives are not educated and there is no provision for their education. Marxists see formal education as one of the superstructures which tend to enslave the minds of the ordinary people in the society. Whatever knowledge the African workers had been given was of the wrong type which will never make those people rise against the capitalist system. Their education only enables them to worship capitalist lords like Kurtz and not to revolt against him. There is no class consciousness observed in the novella. Marxists would have wanted the people to have real education that would make them class conscious which will accelerate their revolt. Thus depriving the natives of education and keeping them ignorant is one of the tools of the capitalist powers which is applied on the colonies so that they do not revolt.

Religion is another issue in Marxist criticism. The role played by religion in a work is important for Marxist criticism. Like Karl Marx himself who said that religion is the opiate of the people, most Marxists do not find any saving grace from religion to stop the bourgeoisie from exploiting the masses. Most of the times, it is religion that makes the exploited masses accept their fate: religion feeds a dose of fatalism. Conrad subtly makes jest of religion by using Marlow to compare imperialistic occupation of the capitalists in Africa to that of the Roman occupation of Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. As far as Christianity is concerned, Rome or the Romans are synonymous to religion. Another religion that comes after Conrad's jest is Buddhism. The frame narrator once describes Marlow as having 'the pose of Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower'. From this backdrop, Conrad sees religion as nothing but a camouflage. Through his chief narrator, Conrad constantly refers to the agents of central station as 'pilgrims' to portray his attitude toward religion. It takes only pilgrims to suffer such difficulties in order to be appointed to a station to trade in ivory. In the novella, it is informed that the natives worship Kurtz; this also has got religious connotation. Marxists believe that it is ignorance that usually drives people to religion; and ironically, the objects of their worship are usually, the source of their suffering, dehumanization and oppression. Most of the times, the people would worship economic structures and their fellow humans whom they believe are superior to them in order to gain their approval. Marxists would blame such mental ignominy on capitalism.

Friedrich Engels in his book – *The origin of the family, Private property, and the State* talks of a society based on equality where everybody will get whatever they want and there will be no private property. Private property, according to him, comes due to slavery. Because of the introduction of slavery by a capitalist system the difference between rich and poor comes into existence. This is what happens in the society of *Heart of Darkness*, where imperialism introduces private property and slavery. Kurtz is an embodiment of all the evils created by free enterprise in a capitalist system. His inordinate passion for ivory in the Congo can attest to this. Everything seems to belong to him:

“You should have heard him say , ‘my ivory’. Oh yes, I heard him ‘My intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my-’ everything belonged to him.

Also the company which traded ivory in Africa was also an embodiment of private property; only a group of people enjoyed all the profit and owned the means of production. Engel said due to private property some people got more than they needed and most of the people were deprived of the basic needs, this happens in the novel too. The natives who represent the proletariat are the ‘have nots’ whose labour is translated into capital which is owned by the colonialist bourgeoisies class who also control the quality of production.

Ideology and the Marxist view of its function in a capitalist society are necessary to this study. Marx states in *The German Ideology* that :

“The division of labour....manifests itself also in the ruling class....so that inside this class one part appears as thinkers of the class...”

The role of these thinkers is to develop and promote ideas that further solidify the power of the dominant class, which in a capitalist society is the class that controls the wealth. As Eagleton puts it:

“The function of ideology is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class.”

### **CITATION FROM THE TEXT**

In an imperial situation like *Heart of Darkness*, which involves an industrial state engaged with a pre-industrial society for purposes of economic gain , profit depends largely on limiting rights for the natives: thus exploitation becomes the tool. Though there are certain repressive mechanisms like armies to subjugate the poor but ‘ideology’ defined by Webster’s Dictionary as ‘The integrated assertions , theories and aims that constitute a socio-political program’ is a more efficient way as it provides a comprehensive picture of the society in which social and economic inequalities are represented as natural and inevitable. The ideological theme in *Heart of Darkness* is distinct as it focuses specifically on racial and cultural differences between Europeans and native people. Here, the ideology is that the company of the Europeans went to Africa to civilize the Congolese. As Marlow is regarded by his aunt as ‘something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle’ who is going to

wean 'those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'. Marlow says that a lot of such thoughts were 'in print and talk just about that time'. Engels calls ideology a 'false consciousness' which is a tool of the bourgeoisie class to control the proletariat. Throughout the novel, Conrad tries to show through Marlow's voice that how this ideology of the colonists is just a false consciousness and that everything was done for profit. To the Marxists, politics and political institutions are nothing but superstructures that further enhance the dastardly ideologies of capitalism. It is political intrigue for the capitalists to hide themselves under the cloak of civilizing the Congolese in order to deprive them of the only source of wealth, which is ivory. The text is evident of this:

"The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside the wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion."

Joseph Conrad explores the nature of colonialism in this text very sarcastically. Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another and it is not restricted to a specific time or place. The author shows that the nature of colonialism has not changed much since the Roman times, except the tools and weapons had become more developed, but the purpose and results remained the same. Conrad reveals the harms of colonialism and the capitalistic approach of the Europeans through Marlow's journey in Congo.

"I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago- the other day ...light came out of this river since-you say knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker- may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling!"

The barbarity of colonialism is very much evident throughout the text. The system of colonial domination, which involved some combination of slavery, quasi-feudal forced labour, or expropriation of property is antithetical to the basic enlightenment principle that every individual is capable of reason and self-government. One of the purposes of colonialism is a control of native's way of life and beliefs. Despite the ambition of civilizing the natives, there is the true face of colonialism: the natives are calmed by a false sense of safety and then slaved by the European colonialists. Exploitation unveils its true nature. As Marlow sees it:

"A lot of people, mostly black and naked moved about like ants."

The natives are not treated like human beings rather like objects. The working conditions and health of the natives are not important for the Europeans. Marlow gives a vivid observation of the cruelty the natives are exposed to, after they no longer can work. They are left to die slowly, starving; they are beaten and hanged so that they could be a lesson for others. "A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black

men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. 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 together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice ; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meagre breasts panted together , the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages.”

Through his novella *Heart of Darkness* , the author reveals that colonialism is just a brutal fight for domination and power in a foreign territory where getting the top is the only thing that matters. The readers get shuddered at the description of the brutality sometimes:

“Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work!... 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.”

### CONCLUSION

One of the merits of the novella is to present colonialism not as a political and economic venture only, but as a consequence of the individual's lust for power and possessiveness and even as an epitome of man's capacity for evil. It is authentic in its' portrayal of the miserable condition of the poor helpless natives whom the white men were exploiting to satisfy their selfish motives. Thus, the author realistically depicts historical circumstances with a sarcastic eye: it attempts to challenge the inequalities while pursuing the cause of it.

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