



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS: IS IT A PURVEYOR OF COMFORTING MYTH?

*Dilip Hazarika

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dudhnoi College

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 11th May, 2025

Received in revised form

24th June, 2025

Accepted 19th July, 2025

Published online 20th August, 2025

Keywords:

Ambiguity, Imperialism, Frame
Narrative, Exotic.

*Corresponding author:

Dilip Hazarika

ABSTRACT

Cette étude Il a été encore une fois un sujet de grande débat si Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* est une militante dénonciation de l'impérialisme ou un épitome de l'idéologie raciste. Cette ambivalence résulte de la technique narrative oblique et du discours du texte. Le cadre narratif distancie l'auteur du discours de la mise en scène de la position de l'auteur dans ce sujet. Le narrateur anonyme qui cite l'histoire de Marlow ne semble pas raconter une histoire avec cohérence. À un certain point, le narrateur se concentre sur les cruautés du colonisateur envers le peuple indigène et montre le véritable visage de la mission coloniale dans le sol africain, le récit change au moment suivant pour décrire le Congo en termes exotiques comme les écrivains impérialistes. La description du personnage central M. Kurtz est également marquée par l'ambiguïté. Le même texte le décrit comme un homme remarquable et aussi comme un symbole de sauvagerie. La réception critique du texte est également divisée entre le voir comme un purveyor de confortant mythe et l'étudier comme un texte anti-impérialiste. Dans cette étude, une tentative est faite pour aller au-delà de cette ambiguïté et atteindre une signification que le texte peut transmettre.

Copyright©2025, Dilip Hazarika. 2025. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Dilip Hazarika. 2025. "Conrad's Heart of Darkness: Is it a Purveyor of Comforting Myth?". *International Journal of Current Research*, 17, (08), 34228-34230.

INTRODUCTION

The critical reception of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is divided between whether the novella is a critique of imperialism or purveyor of comforting myth of racism. This ambivalence is due to the discourse of the text as well as due to its frame narrative technique. Unlike an omniscient narrator, Conrad uses a character, Charlie Marlow, to tell the incidents of the novella through frame narrative technique. An omniscient narrator has generally been defined as sharing beliefs and ethos of the author. On the other hand, whenever a character is allowed to narrate, the narrative is generally shaped by the particular character's fascination and interaction with the surroundings. Since a fictitious character is limited within the span of the fiction, therefore, his thoughts and activities reciprocate with what others do. It is not expected that he would reflect the author's thoughts. In other words, he is not the alter-ego of the author. Moreover, the narrative in the novella is rendered much more oblique by putting it in a frame of 'story within story' since what Marlowe told to the group of four listeners is reported for the readers by an anonymous primary narrator. The distance between the narrative technique and incidents of narration affords Conrad the safest way to express his political opinion which was shaped by his criticism of the cruelties of the colonizers in Congo on the one hand and his unconditional support for the Victorian advocacy for imperialism on the other. This conflict of interest and emotion is effectively manifested in *Heart of Darkness*.

Objectives

The article has the following objectives

- To discuss the elements which made the text a critique of imperialism
- To discuss the racist elements in the text.
- To come to a conclusion whether *Heart of Darkness* is a support to racism or a critique of imperialism.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this paper is purely interpretative and descriptive in nature, based primarily on secondary sources of data like books, journals and internets.

DISCUSSION

At the beginning of the novella, the anonymous narrator presents a picture of Africa through the eyes of Marlow which draw universal attention that the natives were being exploited, but towards the end, a perceptible transformation is noticed in the narrator's attitude and treatment, as if he recognized in the wilderness of Africa some mysterious influences which casts spell on anyone coming from outside to acquire its native exotic behavior. In this light, the moral and spiritual degradation in the central character of novella Mr. Kurtz's can

be related more to the influence of the wilderness than due to his essential weakness of the character. Given this ambivalence in tone and narration, it is actually difficult, as Benita Parry has observed, to define whether the text is militant denunciation of imperialist ideology or reluctant affirmation of the same. Conrad himself had visited Congo in 1890 and saw the atrocity committed there. However, the accounts given in the text does include much more. Perhaps atrocity committed in king Leopold's African Empire which he came to know through British Press during the time got on his nerve. He wanted to expose it though he had some reservation for the British Empire from the other European Empire. To show how the underlying ideals of any colonial mission are misused in Africa, he used vivid and graphic images and languages of greed, violence and hot desires of the civilized Europeans:

"a slight clinking behind" Marlow observed there "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. . . 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 . . ." (Conrad, 1902, p. 23)

The mercilessness and intolerable nature of the European colonizer is further manifested when Marlow reported that the criminals were put to death by putting them in a hole dug on the slope of the hill denying a proper burial. Indeed there are many instances where minimum living rights of the natives are neglected by the Whites. Ironically, however, they are the white and civilized groups, coming to civilize the Africans. Thus, the subversion of dichotomy that the White race is superior and civilized against black is an important aspect of the text. This subversion is perceived both in tone and in the narrative trend. For instance, the punishment inflicted on the criminals by putting them in a hole to die like an animal is mockingly justified by the author as an act of philanthropic mission for which they had come to that place. It has been increasingly made to feel that the colonial mission which is expected to be a philanthropic mission is anything but philanthropic.

Conrad had considered seriously the rapid decrease of the population during the reign of Leopold's from 1888 to 1908 in Africa. For him, unlike other European writers, the news of 600000 persons, as presented by the then British press, that had been uprooted, tortured and murdered through the forced labour system during that time is not a joke. He tried to draw the universal attention to the seriousness of the issue. Therefore, in a letter written to Roger Casement, co-founder of the 'Congo Reform Association' he regretted that the "conscience of Europe which seventy years ago. . . put down the slave trade on humanitarian grounds tolerates the Congo state to-day". (Barbara Harlow, 2004, p. 739) Still there are many grounds where the text can be criticized as being racist text. While exposing the atrocity committed in Africa, Conrad used the same terminologies which were used by the other racist writers. Hence, he has been the subject of harsh criticism from African writers. Writers like Chinua Achebe called him a 'bloody racist' and 'purveyor of comforting myth'. Moreover, "though the text renders discordant to the resonances of white, yet it firmly establishes the resonances of black and dark as equivalences for the savage and unredeemed, the corrupt and degraded and cruel and atrocious at the same time. There is a

shift in his sardonic tone and its anti-imperialist image as soon as Kurtz's importance grows". Kurtz was presented as a prodigy an emissary of pity and science and progress sent to Congo for the guidance of the cause entrusted to him by Europe. He was expected to exert higher intelligence, wide sympathies and a singleness of purpose though ultimately he became a murderer and perhaps even a cannibal taking pleasure in human sacrifices. The tone and language shifts so dramatically with the emergence of Kurtz that it takes a defensive turn and made us feel that the spell of wilderness is more responsible for his degradation than fragility and essential wickedness of his character. The vividness of the exotic description that Marlow provided with his upward movements in the river evokes such a feeling. 'Going up that river', Marlow narrated "was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the Earth and the big trees were kings" which would subsequently transgress people till he would be "bewitched and cut off for ever from everything." (Conrad, 1902, p. 54) Here the narrative is shaped through Imperialist imagination. Africa is explained with maximum possible ignominy. It has been endowed with the power of transgression. It can transgress people from its proper way and may lead to damnation. So, a Faustian narrative is also hidden in the text. The spell with which it binds people to its bosom is equally devilish. Marlow said "it looked at you with a vengeful aspect" like any Mephistophelian agent. The spell is so tempting that it would lead one to exercise often wild powers like ornamenting one's own garden with the ball-like shape of the severed human head. The intensity of the spell is felt more when there is not even a single *good angel-like* power to appeal to one's good part of the conscience. This is exactly what happened to Kurtz. His complete seclusion in that vast wilderness had made him susceptible to the call of the wild and to awake within him the dormant instincts. He had completely given up his civilized behavior and identified himself with the rhythmic sounds of the tribal drums and ritual chanting which was so much a part of the wild Africa. He was so much spell-bound and entangled by the wilderness that even in his poor condition of his health he tried to respond to its appeal and Marlowe's effort went in vain though he "tried to break the spell--- the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness--- that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten brutal instincts." (Conrad, 1902, p. 53) These terminologies, vocabularies and tone have unmistakably revives the imperialist imagination of Africa. But why did Conrad make this shift in his narrative? Whatever the answer to the question, Conrad never meant to support imperialism in Congo but to expose the real *malafide* intention of the imperialism behind the mask of philanthropic mission. Given that position, the author's use of racist terminologies can be justified through the following ways. Conrad may be giving a realistic account of the life of the people in Congo, because it is to be noted that the writer had stayed there for a considerable period of time and hence he knew the call of the wild, the kind of physical sensation that one can have in that land. So, it may be said that he tried to replicate that sensation in that text; in doing so he surpassed the racist and imperialist concern. Secondly, the shift of tone and narration may be a part of his narrative technique, because as observed by Chinua Achebe this duality in the text's narrative has meaningful significance since *Heart of Darkness* though "*marginalizes the Africans. . . Marlow gives them prominence when he describes, with telling vividness, the plight of the chain-gang and of the exploited workers dying in the grove. What the other European choose to ignore, Marlow observes with sardonic indignation.*" *Relegation*

is the theme of narrative." (Achebe, 2016, p. 21) This reading of the text had great significance because it invited a different perspective to examine the text. Even Achebe, who earlier held the text as 'purveyor of comforting myth' and held Conrad as a bloody racist seemed to soften in his new reading. What other saw as racism in Conrad, Achebe now realized as the inevitable requirements that the narrative demands; not as underlying ideology that it supports. And what other saw as imperialism in Conrad, Achebe noticed a sardonic indignation mixed with it. Therefore, the shift in tone and language never conforms to the imperialist imagination of Africa; rather it raises certain questions about it. What is the value of civilization if it is subjected to change? Is civilization the supreme value on the earth? Is it justified to look down upon the African culture only because they are different from European culture? These are a few questions which the narrative of the text anticipates to offer a critique of the whole imperialist mission.

However, the ambiguity never ends there; it reaches to a different level of complexity towards the last part of the text, particularly with meaning of Kurtz's death-bed cry 'the horror! the horror!' and Marlow's appreciation of Kurtz as 'a remarkable man.' African writers explained this from the racist point of view and they held that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected and is so normal that acts that are condemned as the vilest of crimes when committed in the supposedly civilized West can be linked to a 'heroism of spirit' when committed in Africa against Africans. This allegation from the African writer was made as soon as writers like Lionel Trilling held Kurtz as 'hero of the spirit.' According to him Kurtz is the hero of spirit because by his "regression to savagery Kurtz had reached as far down beneath the constructs of civilization as it was possible to do, to the irreducible truth of man, the innermost core of his nature, his heart of darkness." (Brantlinger, 1985, p. 378) In other words, Kurtz's death-bed cry is due to his realization of moral and spiritual degradation as well as his fear for subsequent damnation in the gallows. But to make him 'hero of the spirit' on this ground will be unjust because his criminality would surely outlast his realization and subsequent repentance. Kurtz was a murderer and took devilish pleasure. Therefore, Patrick Brantlinger, an American critic, interprets his death-bed cry differently. According to him Kurtz heroism consists in "staring into an abyss of nihilism so total that the issues of imperialism and racism pale into insignificance." (Brantlinger, 1985, p. 18) In other words, Kurtz death-bed cry is due to an existential realization which enables him to see beyond the mist of illusion to nihilism.

However, to interpret his last utterance from this point of view will be, it seems, inadequate to the underlying arguments that the text builds. Because it cannot be expected that Kurtz who was so deeply possessed by the material world of ivory as well as by the spell of the wilderness would have an existential realization of the life and the world.

Therefore, it seems, his death-bed cry would have a more down-to-earth attitude. It may be due to his realization of betrayal to Europe or more particularly to his Intended who was waiting back in home expecting him to be just and upright there. No sooner had he realized his degradation than he felt it unbearably horrible which he spoke out as horror in his time of death. Moreover, there is one more interpretation of his last words which have more significance as far as the anticipation of the narrative is concerned. It is his understanding of the nature of civilization which he represents. How much it is justified to dominate a different country and rule, uproot and kill people there which can be excused by an underlying *idealism of civilizing the brute*? He realized the futility of such an argument and subsequently understands that he had committed an unavoidable sin. Thus, his death-bed utterance refers to the falsity of such a civilizing mission which is powerful enough to cause serious damage. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is full of ambiguity. Its language, tone and phraseology are so intricately and tactfully orchestrated that it has resulted in layered meaning. Any interpretation is not the last one, it always leaves its way open for further discussion. Hence, the question asked at the beginning remains unresolved till the end of the novella.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (2016). An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. *The Massachusetts Review*, 21.
- Barbara Harlow, M. C. (2004). *Archives of Empire*. Duke University Press.
- Baum, J. (1975). THE "REAL" "HEART OF DARKNESS". *Conradiana*, 183-187.
- Brantlinger, P. (1985). Heart of Darkness: Anti-imperialism, Racism or Impressionism? *Fall*, 363-385.
- Conrad, J. (1902). *Heart of Darkness*. Elegant Ebooks.
- Hawkins, H. (1979). Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*. *PMLA*, 286-299.
- Kishler, T. C. (1963). Reality in "Heart of Darkness". *College English*, 561-562.
- Manocha, N. (2014). The Readable Across "Heart of Darkness". *The Conradian*, 31-43.
- Meisel, P. (1978). Decentering "Heart of Darkness". *Modern Language Studies*, 20-28.
- Ridley, F. H. (1963). The Ultimate Meaning of "Heart of Darkness". *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 43-53.
- STARK, B. R. (1974). Kurtz's Intended: The Heart of Heart of Darkness. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 535-555.
