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Representation of the Native Africans: A Postcolonial Reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

This article essentially examines Joseph Conrad's presentation of the native Africans as black, savage, barbarous, primitive, shadow of evil, unproductive, and inhuman in his famous novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The paper sets out focusing on the facts related to the postcolonial studies that have become a new academic discipline which criticizes those systems created by the colonizers. Postcolonial theory participates in discussing race, othering, subaltern, and orientalism. The word 'postcolonial' pertains to the repercussions of imperialism or colonialism on various cultures and communities. Although there have been many discussions on the theme of exploitation of Africa by the colonizers in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the present study explores and explains how Conrad is unsympathetic in depicting the identity and lifestyle of the native Africans and backwardness of this region through the qualitative research by using many postcolonial terms like racism, othering, subalternity, and orientalism. The findings of the experiment demonstrate an amplification of the Europeans' perception of the orient as distinct and lacking in civilization. Consequently, it is argued that it becomes incumbent upon the Western world to pass judgement on them. However, it is paradoxical that the individuals shown as seemingly civilised in the book are, in fact, quite savage. Indeed, the insatiable desire for power, feelings of envy, and the relentless pursuit of ivory have propelled these individuals towards a detestable transformation, whereby they have become corrupt, horrible, and ruthless entities that exploit the indigenous Africans as enslaved labourers for their own self-serving objectives, then discarding them as if they were disposable refuse.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Racism, Othering, Subalternity, Orientalism.

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Introduction

Joseph Conrad has been excoriated in the postcolonial discussion because of his masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* (1899) which depicts the journey of Marlow “through an unfamiliar wilderness with a native guide” (Tyson, 2006: 427) to Africa. Being a European, Conrad has a soft corner for glorifying the idea of enlightening the African people because he has no practical experience of the atrocities of colonialism and other physical violent occurrences that have to face the native Africans. In that case, it is easily conceivable that the novel may misrepresent the proper scenario of the situation of African people. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe considers Conrad as a “racist” and “a good storyteller into the bargain” because he thinks that *Heart of Darkness* (1899) “set[s] Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest” (Achebe, 1977: 251-252). Hence this article projects the issues of racism, othering, subalternity, and orientalism.

The word 'racism' refers to a kind of social division that categorises, marginalises, and devalues individuals belonging to non-white racial groups. Marlow, the alter ego of Conrad, always attacks the African black people by presenting them negatively and criticizes the darkness of African natural setting. The term "othering" is coined by Gayatri Spivak, who defines it as the process by which “one group excludes or marginalizes another group” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989: 188). The concept of 'subaltern' is adopted by Antonio Gramsci. The mere word "subaltern" connotes lower-ranking individuals who must rely on the actions of the dominant class in order to get their voices heard. These individuals are subjugated to the governing class. Spivak thinks that subaltern means the “oppressed subject [...] or more generally those ‘of inferior rank’” (Gandhi, 1998: 1). The term 'orientalism' gained significant prominence with the release of Edward Said's influential work titled *Orientalism* in 1978. Orientalism points out knowledge about the eastern societies and their cultures by the western scholars as “an ideological accompaniment of colonial power” (Loomba, 2005: 43) to posit the “East as the radical racial cultural Other” (Nayar, 2015: 118).

In the novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899), native Africans are given the silent status to depict their ignorance so that the colonizer’s view becomes the world view. The article aims to argue that the native Africans are convinced about their inferior rank and they believe that the interests of the colonizers are the interests of all and so they help the Europeans blindly. In doing so, the native people become so much traumatized that they remain stuck on a static

moment of life and even they forget about their basic rights, and they are considered as strange people. Marlow observes the bestiality of imperialism everywhere, but he does not take any attempt to stop such kind of brutality. Edward Said argues that Conrad's audience are European and they don't give attention to Marlow's confirmation of "restoring Africa to European hegemony by historicizing and narrating its strangeness" (Said, 1994: 198). Conrad, being an "acculturated Englishman" (Said, 1994: 27), lacks the ability to comprehend the intricacies of African culture, resulting in his maintenance of "an ironic distance" (Said, 1994: 27). Thus, Conrad regards Africa as "an atrocious nuisance, a culturally and politically inferior place" (Said, 1994: 31). The primary objective of this research is to analyse Conrad's portrayal of African people as marginalised and inferior human beings, using postcolonial concepts such as racism, othering, subalternity, and orientalism. In general, the findings suggest that European culture and society have not successfully fostered a notion of equality that extends beyond ethnic divisions.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design, using a descriptive-qualitative approach for data analysis. The primary objective of this research paper is to examine and elucidate Conrad's misrepresentation of the identity and lifestyle of native Africans. This will be accomplished by the use of qualitative research methods, using several postcolonial theories. The primary scholarly foundation of this study is derived from Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), along with other relevant literary sources. Various databases, including the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), Web of Science, Scopus, and Embase, are used to collect articles for the purpose of extracting relevant information for the research study. In this case, 'native Africans', 'postcolonialism', 'Joseph Conrad', and 'Heart of Darkness' have been used as search items to collect relevant articles. The data have been compiled through discourse analysis of many other related books and criticisms from different perspectives to verify that in the name of enlightenment with the motto of light of education, light of religion and light of construction, the colonizers started brutality in Africa.

Analysis of racism

The word racism appears in social, political and cultural theory to denote a kind of discrimination because of the physical complexion and biological characteristics. The term

'racism' is the belief that indicates a kind of discrimination against people on the basis of their skin color or ethnic origin. Racism "involves questions of belonging, location, rights, citizenship, empowerment, welfare, affiliation, and could be the locus of discrimination, exclusion, and oppression" (Nayar, 2010: 217-218). Actually, racism is a technique of the colonizers to achieve their goals of getting more territories, wealth and raw materials. Hence, they treat the natives as animals and savages so that it can be easy to dominate them. Many Europeans argue that *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is the finest example of a criticism of colonialism, although the book is really a narrative of a coloniser who recounts everything in the dark. Chinua Achebe holds the perspective that the depiction of racism in Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), had intricate and captivating qualities.

In the opening of the novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the very narrator Marlow recounts his opportunity to assume the role of a steamboat captain on a voyage to Africa. This opportunity arose due to the unfortunate demise of one of the company's captains, who was killed by the indigenous population after a dispute arising from a miscommunication over "two black hens" (Conrad, 1989: 2). Here Marlow recounts the natives of Africa as savages and barbaric because they can kill any person for a trivial matter. Again, Marlow observes blackness in everywhere; even the hens are also black. The very word 'black' categorizes people or place as inferior and evil to the colonizers. Thus, Marlow acquires a kind of prejudice against the native Africans that they are violent in their nature. As a black intellectual warrior, Richard Wright focused this kind of prejudice of white people and their practice of supremacy over the black people in his novel *Native Son* (1940). By explaining different experiences with the African people and land, Marlow exposes how the native's identity and life style is affected and represented by the colonizers through economically and culturally. Upon his arrival, Marlow meets up with an unfamiliar society and is confronted with a multitude of challenges stemming from dehumanising actions, ultimately leading to a complete feeling of alienation. He describes the natives as under privileged group because of their skin color. Postcolonial thinker Fanon says, "Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (Fanon, 1952: 110). Actually, Conrad presents Africa "as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe" (Achebe, 1977: 252).

Heart of Darkness (1899) is a collection of racially biased incidents that are recounted by the narrator, Marlow. He observes the movement of individuals of African descent, stating, "I saw the black people run", "Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path", "Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails"

(Conrad, 1989: 19), “Black shapes crouched, lay, sat” (Conrad, 1989: 20). The aforementioned remarks highlight that racism is characterised by the use of language that embodies “mockery, cruelty and discrimination” (Nayar, 2015: 221) and it is a prominent aspect for Conrad, as well as several other Europeans. In an interview with Emily Reddy for Pennsylvania State University, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian author, says that “I didn’t think of myself as black when I was in Nigeria because there was no need” (Adichie, 2013). So like Adichie the African people were totally unaware of how the imperialists shape them as black and racially inferior being in their writings. *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is perceived through the eyes of a European and so Marlow displays his racial attitude towards Kurtz’s black mistress by saying: “She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress” (Conrad, 1989: 60). Here Conrad projects the prejudice of the European people against the black Africans that they are savage and dangerous looking. Marlow notices that she wears “barbarous ornaments . . . her hair was done in the shape of a helmet, she had brass leggings to the knees” (Conrad, 1989: 60). That means her outfit is being questioned as well. The woman is beautiful in her place but in the eyes of colonisers she is savage and uncivilised. Through this approach, the colonisers perpetuate the subordination of indigenous populations and marginalise their cultural heritage. Consequently, Conrad's portrayal of Africa demonstrates his racial bias, since he consistently depicts the continent and its inhabitants as inherently primitive and uncivilised.

Othering in *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

The term ‘othering’ defines an individual or groups of people who are negatively exposed and labeled as different within the norms of a social group. Othering denotes “(the colonizers’ treatment of members of the indigenous culture as less than fully human) and colonial oppression in all its forms” (Tyson, 2006: 427). Postcolonial theorists use the word “other” to describe a position that is granted by a dominating subjectivity to someone or something that is unfamiliar, superfluous, and also seen as the authority's antithesis. According to Lois Tyson, “in order to subjugate an “alien” people, a nation must convince itself that those people are “different,” and “different” must mean inferior to the point of being less than fully human (and) in postcolonial terminology, the subjugated people must be othered” (Tyson, 2006: 433). In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Conrad has developed a kind of difference that means binary oppositions of ‘us’ and ‘other’ between the West and the East. It is pointed out by Chinua

Achebe in "An Image of Africa", "the novel portrays Africans as a prehistoric mass of frenzied, howling, incomprehensible barbarians: "Africa [is a] setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor" (Tyson, 2006: 428). During the journey, Marlow, the narrator of the novel, observes not only the brutality of imperialism but also the poor and miserable situation of the natives "as the standard of savagery" (Tyson, 2006: 428). In the novel, the Europeans engaged in trade with the local Africans with the aim of advancing their own interests. Although the colonisers first espouse the ideals of promoting education, religion, and development, they eventually see the untapped potential of these antiquated territories and go on a venture to procure ivory. Kurtz who is "a first-class agent" (Conrad, 1989: 22), becomes so much obsessed with ivory that he rejects to leave Africa and returns to Europe and he forgets totally about his mission because in his mind there is no sign of soft feeling for the native Africans. The novel depicts the ferocity that was imposed on the native Africans by the colonisers and presented the Africans as 'other' but the shocking thing is that the Africans do not know "what moment (their) inferiority comes into being through the other" (Fanon, 1952: 110). In addition to being the 'other' and thereby deprived of power, native Africans are transformed into outsiders and they have no choice. They become "being for others" (Fanon, 1952: 109) and have to work for intruders. Marlow witnesses the indigenous people constructing a railway, and he notes that "all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking" (Conrad, 1989: 19). The indigenous African population in this region is subjected to severe mistreatment and inhumane oppression. Insufficient provision of food is seen even in their case. Consequently, the individuals experienced a gradual decline in health, rendering them debilitated and ineffective, ultimately being granted permission to retreat and recuperate. The presence of blackness, sickness, and mortality serves to illustrate that the colonisers have indeed introduced a figurative darkness into the realm of reality under the guise of enlightenment and they don't give "sufficient attention" (Fanon, 1952: 109) to these facts because they cannot "understand the being of the black man" (Fanon, 1952: 110) as the black people "must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon, 1952: 110).

At the Outer Station, when Marlow encounters a white man, he is delighted seeing the civilized dress up of him and he says, "I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots" (Conrad, 1989: 21). Being a representative of colonizers, Marlow "believed that only their own Anglo-European culture was civilized, sophisticated . . . (because) their technology was more highly advanced" (Tyson,

2006: 419) and so he “shook hands with this (white) miracle” (Conrad, 1989: 21) and it is discovered that this white man holds the position of chief accountant inside the Company. On the contrary, Marlow represents the native African people as “black”, “eyeballs glistening”, “bodies streamed with perspiration”, “faces like grotesque masks” (Conrad, 1989: 17), “black and naked, moved about like ants” (Conrad, 1989: 18). In this way, Marlow defined the native peoples as “savage, backward, and undeveloped (Tyson, 2006: 419). Natives are savage that means they are “other and, therefore, not fully human” (Tyson, 2006: 420). Thus, through the fictitious narrator, Conrad has separated “what is non-white, non-Western, and non-Judeo-Christian from the acceptable and designated Western ethos (Said, 1994: 31). Actually, the Europeans view themselves as the embodiment of proper ‘self’ and the native people are regarded as ‘other’.

Interpretation of subaltern nature in *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

The word 'subaltern' was first conceptualised by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci as a critical framework to delineate social groups characterised by limited political and cultural influence. These classes are characterised by a general condition of subordination and are subject to domination by privileged classes, such as the bourgeoisie. The aforementioned terminology has been incorporated into postcolonial discourse through the efforts of the Subaltern Studies collective of historians, who have provided a definition that characterises it as the individual who is racially, culturally, gender-wise, and ethnically subordinate to the white colonial power, and is shaped by the hegemonic practises and discourses of colonialism. In postcolonial discourse, subalterns are the “people of inferior status . . . with the majority of poor” (Tyson, 2006: 425). In her article titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak explores the question of whether individuals belonging to marginalised and oppressed groups, known as the subaltern, are able to effectively voice their experiences and perspectives inside dominant discourses. The terminology in question assumes significant relevance within the framework of postcolonial theory.

In his book *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Conrad portrays the native inhabitants of Africa as a subaltern tribe. The novel's narrator, Marlow, portrays the appalling conditions of the local people, yet he never makes an effort to interact with them. Marlow only observes them because “subalterns always remain the subjects of others’ representations, lacking a voice in which to articulate themselves” (Nayar, 2015: 145). Marlow speaks with the intended of Kurtz because

she is from elite class but he never speaks with Kurtz's black mistress because she comes from a subaltern group. Being a white woman, the intended of Kurtz can share and speak about her regrets and emotions for the death of Kurtz but the black mistress cannot speak and share her agonies, even she does not know what happens in the life of Kurtz. This double slandered behavior proves that the black mistress is the member of the subaltern group who cannot speak. It is believed that Mr. Kurtz is a colonial exploiter who is in possession of intellectual power. Using this ability, he is said to have subjugated the local people and utilised them as slaves, much as Prospero did in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* when he subjugated both Ariel and Caliban. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero instructs Caliban in more civilised ways of living and speaking, while the colonisers in Conrad's work are seen to instruct the indigenous in the English language and use them on their ships as crew. But their English speaking is not clear because no subaltern group can speak itself. The best example comes when the cannibal crews become hungry and urge to give them the dead body of the nigger by saying, 'catch 'im. Give 'im to us' . . . 'Eat 'im!' (Conrad, 1989: 42). Here the voice of the subaltern group focuses that they are unable to speak fluently and they are submissive and depended on the sympathy of the colonisers. The way Marlow portrays Kurtz's interaction with the indigenous Africans highlights the uneven power dynamics between colonisers and colonial people. Marlow asserts that groups of individuals with dusty skin and splayed feet, often referred to as "niggers," were seen arriving and departing. These individuals were engaged in a continuous flow of trade, including the exchange of various manufactured commodities such as low-quality cottons, beads, and brass-wire, which were transported into the depths of darkness. In compensation for these items, a small but valuable amount of ivory was obtained. According to this perspective, the aboriginal people are untouchable and "dirty niggers" (Fanon, 1952: 109), but they are also just instruments for obtaining ivory, and as a result, they join the proletarian class and lose their voice. Marlow observes the aboriginal people throughout the whole book, but when he feels like talking, he engages with the white people. Thus, he creates a kind of binary relationship between the Europeans and the native Africans because "subordination cannot be understood except in a binary relationship with dominance" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989: 245). The absence of dialogue from the native Africans in the book serves as a reflection of the perspectives articulated by Gayatri Spivak in her renowned essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The assertion is made that subaltern populations are inherently incapable of acquiring a means of expression.

Orientalism in *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

The word 'orient' implies the Eastern world and the term 'oriental' indicates the Middle East and Near East and Far East. The corresponding word of the orient is 'occident' which indicates the Western world. The academic term 'orientalism' is used to define the "European construction of the East as primitive, savage, pagan, undeveloped and criminal" (Nayar, 2010: 160). The concept of Orientalism was introduced by Edward Said, a prominent Palestinian-American academic, in his seminal work titled "Orientalism," which was released in 1978. The term "Orientalism" pertains to a collection of Western perspectives, depictions, and generalisations about the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa (sometimes denoted as the "Orient"), which have been formulated and sustained by Western academics, authors, artists, and establishments. Said's scholarly endeavours mostly centre on the examination of Western representations and scholarly inquiries pertaining to the East, with a specific emphasis on the historical backdrop of colonialism and imperialism. Western depictions of the "Orient" often exhibit characteristics of exoticism, primitiveness, enigma, and inferiority when juxtaposed with the perceived "civilised" Western world. Said's criticism of orientalism is fundamentally grounded in its inherent power dynamics. Said believed that the portrayal of the East by the Western world was not characterised by neutrality or objectivity, but rather exhibited a profound interconnection with political, economic, and social power dynamics.

Conrad's literary work, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), portrays a pessimistic depiction of the African region and its indigenous population. The author demonstrates that native Africans are characterised by a lack of education, poverty, and primitiveness, hence suggesting a perceived need for their governance and development, which is seen to be the responsibility of Europeans. This is why; many European communities start controlling the native Africans with their new technology and use them as their slaves. Systematically enslavement of the entire population of the country reflects the dehumanization of the enlightened Europeans. In the novel, Native Africans are not allowed to communicate with Marlow rather they are represented by him. Marlow meets many Africans and he describes them according to his personal visualization. He uses many insignificant words to portray Africans like "black figure", "nigger", "pitiless", "savage" etc. This representation indicates that they are the subject of the study of the Europeans. Again, when the natives speak, their language is not clear. So, the colonizers think that it is their duty to research the orient people.

The colonisers thought that Africa is a mysterious country. Marlow describes the most bizarre image of the black cannibals who work in his steamboat. These cannibals are hungry because their hippo meat throws out of the ship because of odor pollution. They are so restraint that they do not attack on the white people. Many critics raised a question whether there was cannibalism in Africa or it is a mysterious depiction of the colonisers. Actually, misrepresentation is the technique of justifying European colonialism. Conrad not only represents the African people but also, he takes the duty of projecting the African region. In doing so he creates a dichotomy between the Congo River and The Thames River. He shows that the Thames River is the symbol of civilization. On the other hand, the Congo River is the symbol of darkness and violent in nature. Conrad presents African jungle negatively stating, "The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist" (Conrad, 1989: 16). He observes primitiveness everywhere to symbolize advanced intellectual ability of the Western people. Another aspect that contributes to the dehumanisation is the absence of proper names among the indigenous population. They are addressed as black, savage, and nigger. According to Conrad, Mr. Kurtz was a polite man but because of living with the savage Africans, he becomes degenerated and hostile and mad. According to Lois Tyson, "colonialist ideology [...] was based on the colonizers' assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded" (Tyson, 2006: 419). Furthermore, the story centres on the indigenous African population's way of life, but narrated by the perspective of a European man. Due to cultural variations, it is necessary to challenge the criticism regarding the appropriate presentation of the native Africans. Hence, the concept of African identity may be seen as a construct shaped by the narrative of the coloniser. The indigenous inhabitants of Africa consistently experience disruptions to their tranquil existence due to the interference of colonisers, resulting in an ambiguous and precarious social standing as the "other." In reality, indigenous communities are often distinguished by their cultural simplicity, yet in the perspective of the colonisers, they are often seen as savage.

Conclusion

An analysis of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) from a postcolonial perspective reveals the portrayal of Africa's enduring anguish and affliction as a consequence of European colonialism.

The story focuses primarily on the ethical dilemmas that arise as a result of European colonisation of Africa. In conclusion, the dichotomy between "civilisation and savagery" emerges as a major theme and raises a significant problem in this work of fiction. Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), presents a critical examination of the conventional ideals upheld by white civilization and questions the legitimacy of imposing these ideals upon ostensibly "primitive" societies under the guise of a "civilising mission." Conrad also portrays the so-called civilised whites as rapacious monsters that battle it out for control of the 'backward' people of the world by sucking their blood. They are particularly fascinated by the natives' wealth, particularly their ivory. After all, the story centers on the colonisers' persecution of the locals and their imperialistic avarice, as well as the stark contrast between what the civilised white people say they believe in and the actions they really take. Ultimately, Marlow reveals the pervasive presence of evil that extends beyond the supposedly civilised white people to include the black population residing in the Dark Continent. West is portrayed in the book as the "Self" and East as the "Other." Above all, in addressing the ethnocentric cultural representations of the "other," the novella mainly and unwittingly depends on how Europeans see the aboriginal people as a conventional "savage." One of the most significant responsibilities played by European authors is the construction of an African identity. In the work, black people are portrayed as barbarians, lethargic, harsh, uneducated, reticent, and uncivilised, reflecting the distinctions between civilization and barbarism. On the contrary, white objects and people are portrayed as symbols of civilization. Therefore, the issue of whether Conrad is a "racist" or not is called into question by his critical insight in using "savagery" as a metaphor for the hierarchical link between Europe and Africa.

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