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Heart of Darkness: Reading Life Experience and Political Context

Dr. B. Venkat Rao

Dept. of Literatures in English
EFL University
venkat.b2004@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper is attempted to explore the backdrop of the political context; and also, his conspicuous childhood experience described in Joseph Conrad's seminal text Heart of Darkness (1902). Heart of Darkness was a philosophical and semi-autobiographical novel written in English by Joseph Conrad who was born out of English-speaking country, Polish Ukraine. Conrad family fought for the freedom of the Poland, which was invaded by Russia, Prussia and Austria. His father, Apolo Korzeniowski belongs to the Polish landed gentry or aristocrats who possessed literary and artistic tastes. As Apollo actively participated in Polish independent movement against Russia, he was subsequently arrested and exiled to northern Russia as a punishment. His wife Ewa followed him in his exile with their four-year-old son Joseph Conrad. Conrad's mother Ewa died out of fatigue and tuberculosis in 1865 and his father Apollo died of tuberculosis in 1869. Because of colonialism, he had to experience an exile, isolation, hardship, insecurity and fear accompanied the child Conrad ever since he could comprehend what was going on around him. Constant moving from one place to another and his parents' premature deaths had exposed the child to aspects of life, which are usually unknown to other children of his age. Finally, this paper attempts to know, through Marlow character, how Conrad philosophically unfolds and underscores his personal life experiences to explore the answers to the questions of death, agony, fear, uncertainties and cruelties committed against to the innocents.

Keywords: childhood, experience, text and context, colonialism, exploitation and post colonialism.

When Conrad was born on December 3, 1857, politically, Queen Victoria was celebrating her twentieth year on the throne. During her reign, the British Empire occupied a quarter of the world's population and transformed the British from being the workshop of the world into its wealthy banker. Intellectually, Charles Darwin (1809-82), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) made a new beginning to the world. Conrad had keenly witnessed to all these developments. By the year of Conrad's death, 1924, Europe was still recovering from the First World War (1914-18), the Bolshevik Revolution had succeeded in Russia (1917) and the Irish Free State had come into being (1921). Allan Simmons states that serendipity and historical coincidence combined to link Conrad to the British Empire, and at a moment when colonialism was replaced by the more systematic imperialism. He shares the year of his birth, 1857, witnessed the popular patriotic zeal and initiatives against the colonial rulers in his country and other parts of the world. The year 1857 was also the year of the Indian Mutiny, which regarded as the first war of independence movement in India against the British Empire (Allan Simmons: 8). Thus, he had also witnessed to the devastating effects of the colonialism.

Interestingly apart from all uncertainties and despair, one thing that saved the child was his love of reading, a habit that he cultivated from his father Apollo who had a wonderful collection of books and his father as a poet and a playwright educated at the University of St. Petersburg. He had translated Shakespeare, Dickens and many of the French poets of his time. From his father, Conrad inherited his love for literature and he spent long hours in the library browsing through books and forgetting the real world. He also had developed childhood dream to explore the world by becoming a sailor. By the age of sixteen, Conrad was eager to get out of Poland, a country where his family was hounded and persecuted ever since he was a baby. He was the son of a "convict", and in Russian Poland, he was liable to put in twenty-five years of service as a private soldier in the Russian army. His health was frail, and his nervous condition was rather fragile. Conrad's reading had acquainted him with the tales of the English writer Captain Marryat, the American Fennimore Cooper, and the Frenchman Victor Hugo- all of whom wrote fascinating tales about the sea. In spite of serious opposition from his uncle, Conrad decided to to the sea when he was about sixteen years old. Doctors supported him; they thought that his health would keep better in a

different climate and in the open sea. This period of his life ended with his recovery and his setting sail to the *Mavis*, a British steamer headed for Malta and Constantinople.

Of specific relevance to *Heart of Darkness* is the ‘Scramble for Africa’ in the late 19th century. Before then, as place names like Ivory Coast, Gold Coast and Slave Coast crudely witness, European involvement in the continent was largely exploitative. Nevertheless, across the century explorers and missionaries steadily mapped the interior of the so-called ‘Dark Continent’. Such pioneering exploration was quickly overtaken by imperialist exploitation, as European powers were attracted to Africa’s resources. By 1900, almost all of Africa had been appropriated and pillaged by European powers. (Allan Simmons: 10). All this and more went into the novel *Heart of Darkness*. However, Conrad went on sailing after this Congo trip, his failing health and his frequent nervous depressions gradually stood in the way. He married Jessie George in 1896, and finally settled down to a life on the land. However, not an intellectually inclined person, Jessie proved to be a source of strength and stability for the hyper-sensitive and melancholic Conrad and two sons were born to them- Borys in 1898 and John in 1906.

After settling down in England as its citizen and particularly after this marriage, Conrad interacted with a large group of friends who were distinguished writers of artists of the time. His friends included John Galsworthy, H.G.Wells, Willian Rothenstein, Ford Maddox Ford and Bertrand Russell. Between 1874 and 1878 he sailed in several French ships in various capacities’ he travelled to Martinique, Columbia, Venezuela, and later to Spain where he is believed to have been involved in gun-running for the forces of Don Carlos, pretender to the Spanish throne. It is also said that Conrad was heavily in debt and shot himself in the chest in suicide bid some time in 1878.

Conrad was deeply fascinated to visit the Africa. Right from his childhood days, he held a special place in his psychology. Captivatingly, he was growing up while cartographers, and the spirit of enquiry were charting the continent and knowledge fascinated him. Later he records in his memoir:

It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at the map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now:

“When I grow up I shall go there”(*Norton Critical Edition*:104)

In 1876, King Leopold II of Belgium founded the International African Association, with himself as its president. He falsely preached that he was opening the association in order to civilize the darkness that enveloped the Africa. Given that *Heart of Darkness* played its part in exposed the atrocities perpetrated in the Congo Free State, ironically the steamboat in which Marlow served was named the *Roi des Belges* (King of the Belgians). The country, Congo, an area almost eighty times as large as Belgium, became Leopold’s personal fiefdom, and he appointed Henry Stanley, who represents the Kurtz’s character in the novel, as chief agent, responsible for establishing steamer routes, signing treaties with native chiefs and setting up a chain of commercial and scientific stations that would fetch the profit to the company. King Leopold II of Belgium wrote:

The mission which the agents of the State have to accomplish on the Congo is a noble one. They have to continue the development of civilization in the centre of Equatorial Africa, receiving their inspiration directly from Berlin and Brussels. Placed face to face with primitive barbarism, grappling with sanguinary customs that date back thousands of years, they are obliged to reduce these gradually. They must accustom the population to general laws, of which the most needful and the most salutary is assuredly that of work. (*Norton Critical Edition* :86)

The novel was widely discussed as foundational text of exposing colonialism because it discusses the arrival of the white men into African with transformative ideals. In spite of an ambiguity in terms of comprehending Conrad’s clear position on colonialism, there had certainly been an ample of undertones in criticizing the colonial masters’ predicaments. To comprehend the relevance of his position, one should note what he himself said about the work: “the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work

in Africa is Justifiable idea. The subject is of our time distinctly, though not topically treated” (Norton Critical Edition: 129). It is also clear that Conrad exposed the subject of the novel- the exploitation of Africa in the name of civilizing the natives who had no rights. Moreover, in any dispute between an African and a European, the so-called ‘general law’ was always invoked to penalize the natives:

This gave rise to every kind of abuse, and it was not unusual to find a local officer flogging mercilessly, without any legal right, any individual African who failed to comply with his wishes. As was to be expected, with development came an increase in outrageous abuses. (*Norton Critical Edition* :90)

Therefore, Conrad opens the novel by posing a philosophical criticism on the totality of colonialism itself. He clearly undertones that England which was colonized by the Romans and other European countries up to the 15th century, had conveniently forgotten its history and now it had occupied many countries in African and Asia the name of civilizing the humanity. He strongly found fault with England for resorting colonialist expansion. Thus, the companies made profits out of the blood and lives of the natives, the gruesome crimes against the African humanity were not mapped out in the hagiography of western civilization. However, Chinua Achebe, the foremost, postcolonial writer, theorist and critic pointed out that Conrad failed to grapple the geographical, cultural and symbolic significance of the Africa:

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks." But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world." (Achebe, Chinua: *An Image of Africa*: 2)

He further states:

Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth. But the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any casual visitor even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad. (Achebe, Chinua: *An Image of Africa*: 10)

Conrad, who had experienced from his childhood the pain of alienation, isolation, exile and eventually mental depression, had genuinely developed a sympathetic concern for fellow human beings who were subject to the humiliation in the name of race and civilization. Therefore, albeit he had limitations like journalist, he had conviction to write for the oppressed. Conrad, in the course of his narration, realized both-the so-called progressive ideals that were being campaigned in the west and on the contrary, exploitation that he clearly witnessed in his journey to Congo. One can undoubtedly acknowledge the fact that Conrad failed to see the oppression, humiliation and exploitation of the African natives from their language, cultural and historical perspective as profoundly analyzed by Chinua Achebe. On the other hand, Conrad's corporeal experiences in Africa had genuinely transformed him as a true human being.

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