



Marlowe as Colonialist: A Postcolonial Study of 'Heart of Darkness'

Marina Khan¹, Muhammad Faisal Rehman², Sundas Jabbar Khattak³

Abstract

Post-colonialism focuses on understanding invasion and systematic occupation by the colonizers. This theory analyzes depiction of the native peoples' culture and descriptions of their living experiences, and explores the notion of resistance against the culture and system that have been invaded. *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), which is author Joseph Conrad's masterpiece, presents the living experiences of Africans in a post-colonial context. The present study has as its major objective an in-depth study of the novel through the experiences faced by the protagonist of the novel, Charles Marlow, in terms of the perspectives of *The Post-Colonial Theory* by Edward Said (1978) and *Subaltern Theory* by Spivak (1993). The study is qualitative in nature because the novel is examined in terms of the elements provided by the theories specified. The result of the study indicates that the novel represents a specimen of post-colonialism in which the observed experiences of African people are fully described. This description depicts the ways in which the natives of Africa had to face systematic marginalization, violation of their culture, passivity, and participation in cultural practices only through snatched freedom. The inhabitants were forced to live in a hybrid culture where their own identity was largely abandoned.

Keywords: Hybridity, Identity, Postcolonialism, Racism

1. Introduction

The well-known plot of *The Heart of Darkness* elaborates several important issues implied by its title, which is a metaphor encapsulating Africa as the most primitive, isolated and benighted continent on the earth, at the same time capturing the archetypal type of evil which had been associated with the continent for a long time. Lewis (1988) says that the title is full of irony, denoting expressively the continent's characterization by King Leopold (1976). He had claimed that the needs of Africa were so vast that the entire nation was shrouded in darkness. Most scholars claim that the novel not only describes the darkness of Africa, but also denotes its past history as a continent ruled by its colonizers and more recently by mysterious external forces.

The postcolonial era represents an important one for people of lesser status because both the country and the population had been liberated from the dreadful grasp of colonials. In its literature, this era reflects many authors' purpose of regurgitating the colonial point of view about the inferior people whom they had long dominated. In his book *Orientalism* Edward Said (1978) coined the term 'Orientalism' to describe the representation of the East by means of Western forms of discourse and their use. This theory focuses the extensive tradition of Western exercise of power through several of its selected aspects. Westerners had been exercising their power through their 'orients,' which channeled the power and determined its exercise in the Eastern countries. Similarly, Bhabha (1994) referred to the construction of personal and cultural identity by the colonials in post-colonial conditions in his influential work *Notion of Hybridity*.

Spivak (1993) tackled the inheritance of colonialism throughout all of her "ethnic and captious theories." She rejected the commonly held belief that the Western World "holds an elite hand over the Third World" as it is increasingly purged from the "vulgarity of sharp savageness." Her literary works centralize more significant marginal themes like the position of women of lesser status in the society, and authorization of their position. In the theoretical perspective of post-colonialism, 'racism' is foundational for the extensive terms that refer to ways in which natives of the colonial country are kept as the marginalized segment (Fanon, 2008). Fanon says that black people fall prey to unnatural complexity through the exercise of power and determination of their identity by their white subjugators. Davidson (1993) says that racism had been the tool devised to effect and justify mass enslavement, and it is still useful for invasion and dispossession of the lands of Africans.

The present study has been conducted to highlight issues of cultural, racial and subaltern identity presented in *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, and to do this in a way that indicates how suppression of the indigenous people is accurately illustrated in a literary work that takes readers on a trek through the African Continent.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Out of the expanded awareness of European thinkers emerged themes regarding colonization and colonials from which arose issues of the perceptions, identity, culture, and race of the different nations that had been former colonies, presented in an unbalanced way. Post-colonial literature more accurately depicts scenes of African life and provides a truer sense of that life. It details the deprivations within the culture, the identity, race, and subalternity in the colonial

¹ Corresponding Author, Lecturer, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan, Email: marinakhan@awkum.edu.pk

² Assistant Professor, The Department of Architecture, University of Engineering and Technology Peshawar Abbottabad Campus, Pakistan

³ Lecturer, English Department, Amir Muhammad Khan Campus, Mardan University of Agriculture Peshawar, Pakistan

era that eventually gave birth to voices of balance and equity, and to exposition of Western suppression of the native inhabitants as Africans.

1.2. Research Objectives

The research objectives of this work are:

- To determine whether the use of post-colonialist theories enhance the meaning of novel.
- To find out the weighty side of colonialism through the character of Marlow.

1.3. Research Questions

Following are the research questions of the study:

- How do theories of post-colonialism affect the interpretation of the novel?
- What are the major traits of colonizers that emerge through the work which can be viewed only from the perspective of post-colonialism?

1.4. Significance of the Study

The present work is conducted in the context of post-colonial studies, and focuses on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. The research examines formerly unacknowledged aspects of Charles Marlow, one of the novel's central characters. The paradigmatic study of Marlow provides helps to provide fuller understanding of the relevant implications of the text, and the character of Marlow proves significant in many additional ways for scholars, students, and teachers.

2. Literature Review

An earlier study conducted by Mutaiah (2010) on *The Heart of Darkness* indicated that this novel presents to its readers colonized people who have been prey to racism. On the basis of the novel's plot, the author concluded that Africans are treated unpleasantly by Americans, showing additionally that Africans have to live non-assertive lives because of lack of toleration of their lifestyle. African people in the novel are called 'nigger,' an epithet that negatively denotes the hidden identity of the native people.

Fatima et al. (2013) found that the novel reflects two types of opposition, one that centers on a sense of ruling, and a second on the sense of being ruled. *The Heart of Darkness* contains representations of barbarisms, and a strong impression that the civilization has been monopolized by the colonizers rather than by the natives of the country. The original inhabitants are considered savage, lazy, cruel, uncivilized illiterates by the colonizers, inferior human beings whose lives contain nothing that complies with the values of the modern world and the world of innovation. To the colonizers, it clearly seems that Africans are "others" in the world.

In another study, Guven (2013) found that the novel presents to its readers a brutal relationship that clearly demarcates the differing moral codes of two types of nations. As events unfold, conflicts between these different moral systems and their standards are perceived by both countries. Colonial people are kept in the cage of 'evil' while honors are imparted to the Europeans colonizers who represent 'good.' The researcher finds in the novel cruel, coercive imposition of European ideas and culture on the African natives.

Michael (2020) in a later study found all the horrors of Western colonialism in *The Heart of Darkness* because the native people represented there are so terribly exploited and marginalized. The novel's representation of colonized people depicts both a journey and an autobiography as it describes the larger-than-life living conditions and larger-than-life experiences of these inhabitants of another continent. Additionally, there is depiction of post-colonial realities in the novel, because it vividly portrays the worst, almost unimaginable living conditions of the marginalized people in Africa.

3. Research Methodology

Because the present study is qualitative in method and purpose, the adopted type of analysis is textual, and it is based on the post-colonial structures outlined through textual description. Post-colonial theory highlights the traditions, norms, values, identity, culture, life experiences and thinking represented in depictions of the colonized people and the colonizers. Implications of these central relationships will be explored and partly determined by concepts provided by philosophers and theorists of the post-colonial era like Edward Said, Spivak, Bhabha and Frantz Fanon to explain and elaborate tendencies and significant circumstances characteristic of the colonial era. The study has adopted the theories of the post-colonial, already mentioned writers to elaborate this interpretation of the text of the novel.

4. Data Analysis

We live as we dream—alone. While the dream disappears, the life continues painfully. (Heart of Darkness, 1902;p. 19)

Analysis

These lines come from a discussion about the activities of the protagonist in the novel *Heart of Darkness*. The post-colonial theory of Said (1978) addresses the marginalized and strange-living scenario implied by these words and out of which they arose. The orientalism aspect of Said's theory deals with the living conditions of the marginalized segment living under the rules and theologies imposed on those who are governed. That term is coined to designate the inhabitants of the colonial country as the 'orient' 'whose freedom and whose civilization must be determined. From the same perspective, this study presents additional interpretations showing the inhabitants without freedom. The post-colonial theory of Spivak similarly focuses the subalterns and their very limited voice, and the quoted lines features the characters' mental state as well as their physical state because they can really live only in their dreams. The terms coined in the lines as "live as we dream," "dreams disappear," "life continues painfully" denotes the living experiences of the Africans who have to live as 'orient' even in their own country. They have no authentic independent voice, and their life is based solely on recognition of aspects of their work rather than on their way of life.

"Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you, smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, "Come and find out. (Heart of Darkness, 1902; p. 18)"

Analysis

The living experiences of Africans are characterized in these lines because these people have to spend their lives accepting the inferior status of plurality and having no specific reasons for living. In the view of Said (1978), colonial people are not given a voice in determining the conditions of their lives, they are considered strange—denizens of the 'orient'— and their ways of behaving are considered the epitome of savagery. The terms 'orient' and 'oriental' designation Eastern country where people who are marginalized are told to perform only the most basic types of actions. Spivak also focuses the marginalization and passivity of colonial people. The quoted lines from the novel communicate the feelings of these marginalized people whose activities occur almost exclusively in the tactile world to which their circumstances confine them; they must serve the colonizers rather than themselves. The life experiences of the oriental people are communicated in the novel's lines, which say that things cannot match their hopes and expectations because they cannot follow their own curiosity but must live with others' dreams; they must accept the only political vision they are allowed to have, a vision derived from the colonizers. The lines represent the living experiences of the African colonials in the sense that the coming of the ship from the shore denotes their complete dependence on the choice and priorities of the colonials. Similarly, the lines "considering arnicas as savage and mute" reinforces the impressions of the indigenous people as savage inferiors who have to live within the subaltern perspective. Subalterns are not given the voice to speak, yet their unheard voice is considered strange.

"I don't like work--no man does--but I like what is in the work—the chance to find you. Your own reality—for yourself not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. (Heart of Darkness, 1902; p. 46)"

Analysis

Passivity and marginalization comprise the central elements of colonialism, which describe the elements of cultures viewed or perceived as strange. Because they seem strange and passive, these strange and passive people lack a voice of in the determination of their cultural and moral systems, the unitary or plural compositions of their societies, in their own freedom, and their ways of living. Because of the characterization of their civilization as 'oriental', 'they are not considered 'fit' to live freely in the general society. Said's discussions (1978) about the power relationships between colonizers and natives indicate that the quoted lines imply the notion of resistance from a Foucaultian perspective: colonials are not given either a chance for, or the right to, prosperity in any of their concerns. Because of their marginalization and the power exercised by colonizers, the colonials must adopt and act from the Western view of the world. Their living experiences occur under an imposed subaltern perspective, and they are required to live in a servile situation that requires constant concern with things, problems, and issues about which their natural attitudes differ markedly from those of the colonizers. The life lens of the 'orient' must continually focus colonials' attention on the colonizers, and the result must be respect. The quoted lines reinforce the theoretical perspective that "self-recognition is abandoned in colonials" and "they have no eyes of seeing rather than observe the shows." Such circumstances tend towards overlord cruelty, and the image of colonists snatching basic rights away from subjugated people while the things they most long for are inadvertently produced while they look on—that image is tragically beautiful and a source of concern.

"Your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. (Heart of Darkness, 1902; p. 8)"

Analysis

Dominant in the perspective of post-colonialism is the concept of resistance, but the characters in *Heart of Darkness* reveal that many things between colonizers and colonized are reciprocal. In the depictions of the life experiences of the characters that reveal the core issue of colonized people, the colonizer controls the minds, the behavior, and the

circumstances of the subject people. The colonials must remain subject to that rule independent of any choice of theirs, but resistance naturally arises. Foucault discusses the resistance which is reflected in the quoted lines, indicating that the colonizer who enjoys power owes that strength to the weakness of others. The Africans' living experiences are represented in the lines where the weakness of the colonizers is as symbolic as their power. Spivak would claim that the voice and living experiences of marginalized people are not assigned the same weight for a positive characterization as their weakness is selected for a negative one, which is then used to restrict their power to none at all.

"Like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker. (Heart of Darkness, 1902; p. 6)"

Analysis

The quoted lines depict a set of painful circumstances and a difficult life situation; they indicate that the inhabitants of Africa suffer greatly because of their circumstances as the governed, the ruled. Conrad identified himself as the protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, in which the plural society with its marginable and marginalized elements presented to show that the colonized nation can only function when it follows the imposed economic and political and social systems of the colonizers. That kind of life is, which is the core element being referred to in the quoted lines, is a life where the colonized have no notion of their own identity, live only to meet their daily physical needs, and value nothing else. Any sense of overarching pattern or system is lacking in the colonial people, so Conrad dramatically displays the crucial aspects of their lives. Spivak in her theorizing claims something similar, that the subalterns have no sense or understanding of the significance of living, and they are told that their experiences and culture have no validity. Like Conrad's novel, the theory of Orientalism deals with peoples viewing the world within their own framework of watching and seeing things. Life experiences where the ownership of land lies outside the control of the inhabitants are graphically depicted in the novel.

"We couldn't understand because we were too far... and could not remember because we were traveling in the night of first ages, those ages that had gone, leaving hardly a sign... and no memories. (Heart of Darkness, 1902; p. 58)"

Analysis

The perspective of the subalterns and the effect of the colonial rule on them emerge in these lines. The description shows that from the perspective of the white colonials, the long tenure of working and earning civilization is useless for the inferior indigenous people who comprise the orient. Circumstances do not bring justice and rest because the constrictive and self-generated rules of the colonials have to be followed. Implications of those lines are that power and civilization are interlinked aspects which have abandoned the people that they have to live under a system of marginalization rather than under a system that allows the multitudinous aspects of their life to become concerns of all. Spivak says that the subalterns are not given the right of living and thinking freely while the suppressing nations are given the right to create the economic, moral, political, and social systems. The unremembered life and the long, long time described in the quoted lines indicates that the subordinate people have not been accorded the right to live under a system of their own making, and that the development of such structures as their life evolves is not acceptable for the colonials. Colonials have tended to increase the complexity of all life's supporting structures related to aspects of what must be tended to, as well as aspects of freedom, yet after passage of an inestimably long time, the living patterns and standards of the oriental people are not yet acceptable to their white rulers.

5. Conclusion

This study, which represents a limited qualitative analysis of the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, has been conducted for the purpose of finding there the elements of post-colonialism presented by the post-colonial theorists Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Because the study is qualitative, the adopted method of analysis is textual analysis in terms of established post-colonial structures and descriptions provided in the text of the novel. Post-colonial theory highlights the traditions, norms, values, identity, culture, life experiences, and thinking characteristic of colonized people and their colonizers. The nature and extent of the relationships between these groups have been elaborated by the philosophers and theorists of the post-colonial era, thinkers and writers like Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon. Their works focus the cultural tendencies and the situations responsible for the emergence of these relationships during the colonial era. This study has adopted the theories of these post-colonial writers to facilitate interpretation of the text of the novel. Determination of ways are there in which post-colonialist theories elaborate and enhance the meaning of the novel. Exploration of the negative side of colonialism as reflected in the character and observations of the novel's chief character, Charles Marlow. The present study has been conducted in terms of those aspects of post-colonialism that focus on the experiences of the subalterns as those are observed by Charles Marlow. The findings of the study are Joseph Conrad had truly reported the elements of post-colonialism through which the life experiences of characters were described. Marlow's commentary verifies that the colonials are asked to observe the life through the

eyes of the colonizers. Exploitation and enjoyment of power happens 'by hook and by crook' in Africa. Native culture is regarded as the culture of savages, even though it has been practiced for thousands of years. Marginalized segments are not given the voice natural to the subaltern perspective. Human development and evolution of the prevailing system form the basis of post-colonialism practices, through which indigenous people receive the overlord perspective of their appropriate personal and social development. No intrinsic value is attributed to the natives of Africa, and within the colonial system, they are to be the ruled, never the rulers. 'Third world' is a term used mostly for Asian and African countries, whose native populations are considered 'orient' and unfit for anything except manipulation. The system of the colonizers is portrayed as appealing, charming, and the surety of the future. Killings and assassination have not stopped since implantation of the system, in spite Marlow's observations that most pains of the colonials have faded away. Native cultures are considered savage; natives are classified as 'orient' or 'oriental,' and natives are compelled to observe the world from the perspective of their overlords. Natives are portrayed as uncivilized and are viewed as tending towards the darkness of baser human impulses. Life of the colonials is depicted as a life of darkness, where experiences take place in the lower levels of the earth. Natives' life experiences are depicted on a dark stage, while the symbols of long trees, river, water, and mountains denote the system and power relationships of the colonials and colonizers. Colonials must live under the identity of the colonizers rather than their own. Unique indigenous identity is seemingly abandoned because of land-grabs and culture imposition. Hybrid cultures emerge from a blend of the native culture with the culture of the invaders.

References

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, Gareth & Helen Tiffin, Ed. (1995). *The Post-colonial studies reader*.
- Conrad, J. (1902). *Heart of Darkness* (R. Hampson & O. Knowles, Eds.). Penguin Classics.
- Conrad's "Heart of Darkness", *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 3(5), 40-45.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Fatima, A. et al. (2015). *Othering of Africans in European literature: A postcolonial analysis of London*: Routledge.
- Guyen, S. (2013). Post-Colonial Analysis of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 2(2), 79-87.
- Mushtaq, H. (2010). Othering, stereotyping and hybridity in fiction: A postcolonial analysis of Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899) and Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians (1980). *Journal of Language and Literature*, 4(3), 25-30.
- Said, E. (1978). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage.
- Spivak, C. G. (1993). *Can subaltern speak?*. Retrieved on July 5, 2022, Retrieved from *and the Politics of Anti-Racism*. London, Zed Books.
- Werbner, P. & Modood, T. Ed. (1997). *Debating cultural hybridity: Multi-cultural identities*. <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%20CanTheSubalternSpeak.pdf>.