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Civilization Versus Savagery: Exploring the Darkness of Heart in *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

The paper seeks to address the question as to what it actually means to be civilized and who the real savages are. The two ideas have been juxtaposed in the context of the novel *Heart of Darkness* where through the absurdity of the colonial enterprise, the inherent evil in human beings has been explored. Taking up the metaphor of 'darkness of heart' an attempt has been made to expose the cruel face of the civilizing mission of the European imperialism and how power degenerates the souls of people. But the saving grace on the parts of humans is the struggle to overpower the dehumanizing evil forces that can turn them into savages and beasts. The novel focuses more on the damage that colonization does to the souls of white colonizers than it does to the physical death and devastation unleashed on the black

natives. This damage to the soul of people is the real evil of imperialism.

Keywords: Imperialism, darkness, dehumanization, soul, savage, civilize.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* published in 1989 offers a critique of European Imperialism and the shallowness of the colonial enterprise to civilize the so-called savages in the distant and far-flung parts of the world. Although imperialism is at the center of the novel, it explores the very source of evil and its impact on human heart. The narrative, the way it has been developed seeks to expose the violence inherent in both the civilized as well as the savage worlds. In fact, it raises the puzzling question as to what it means to be civilized and how in the absence of the societal restraint even the most civilized tend to transform into savages. Through two central characters, Marlow and Kurtz the absurdity of colonial enterprise and the subtle working of evil on the hearts of people has been laid bare in the novel. What differentiate the novel from the many works touching upon the same issues related to the idea of imperialism is the strikingly new treatment of the theme. The novel is not reduced to a piece of writing solely concerned with depicting the horrible face of imperial control and authority over the less powerful people. While it does depict the cruel and intimidating methods adopted by the cultured people to civilize the savage world, it traces the deeper recesses of human heart to show the struggle of human soul amidst all moral depravity and

dehumanization. And therein lies the appeal and charm of the novel.

The narrating voice of Marlow has autobiographical shades in it lending the account an air of credibility. Conrad had the first-hand experience of commanding a steamship in the Belgian Congo in 1890, which he uses to structure the frame of the novel. Marlow's sea journey up the Congo River and his close encounter with the 'darkness' encompassing the savage world unfolds many realities with regard to the civilizing mission of the imperial power. The unanimous and anonymous listeners to his tale, represent the conventional perspectives and values of the British establishment. Marlow sets himself apart from his fellow travelers by recounting his horrible experiences of witnessing the evil of the colonial exploitation from close quarters thereby unfolding a past in which Britain is not the heart of civilization but the savage "end of the world." Adopting an ironic tone as a narrator, he sets out to suggest to his fellow passengers that their assumptions regarding the British Empire may be wrong but he does not offer an alternative to their assumptions. His take on the question of imperialism is never clear and in this he seems to echo the attitude of the writer himself. While Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* exposes the brutality of the colonial rulers and the resistance on the part of the natives that they offer through language, the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are portrayed as silent and inarticulate. In fact it is understood that Achebe writes to combat the stereotypes and offer a corrective to Conrad's take on imperialism. But one needs to pause before one jumps to a conclusion and proves Conrad Eurocentric in his treatment of the imperial business.

Even if Marlow is not deeply involved in the whole affair and sets out on a journey as an adventurer, he has his moments of introspection and meditation on many moral and spiritual questions that his soul confronts. As he travels to Africa and up Congo, he witnesses inefficiency and brutality in Company's stations. The native inhabitants there have been forced into a life of slavery and overwork. The Company agents ill-treat them almost reducing them to the level of beasts. At one of the company's stations Marlow encounters certain scenes that upset his composure and unsettle his complacency. First he witnesses a group of black prisoners walking along in chain led by another black man with a rifle and then near a grove of trees to his great horror he finds a group of dying native laborers left to their fate. He can also see the decaying machinery and a cliff being blasted for no apparent reason. All this fills him with disgust and he can see the foolishness behind the colonial enterprise:

> *"I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men - men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly." (Marlow, p.17)*

Marlow frequently comes face to face with situations that invite him to go deeper and think seriously over them. But it is suggested that he is in a dark world of moral ambiguity where one has to choose between many nightmares and where one loses one's sense of discretion to distinguish between good and bad. Marlow becomes a sort of Buddha who is appalled by cruelty, torture, suffering, death and dehumanization but

cannot do anything as it is inevitable. Unlike most novels that focus on the evils of colonialism, *Heart of Darkness* focuses more on the damage that colonization does to the souls of white colonizers than it does to the physical death and devastation unleashed on the black natives. This damage to the soul of people is the real evil of imperialism. This leads to an exploration of the darkness within. The darkness of the river and the impenetrable dense forests encompassing the white settlements metaphorically projects the darkness of hearts. In fact darkness is all pervasive rendering the possibility of human interaction futile and meaningless.

Another leading character in the novel, Kurtz, has been portrayed with great skill by the novelist and his life actually forms the stuff of the novel. As a Company agent, he has a great reputation and is known for his many talents. Marlow comes to know about him through the Chief Accountant who speaks of him in a tone of veneration and awe. In fact, Kurtz is the "evil genius" who allows his primitive instincts to have free play among the natives. He does not keep up appearances and his "honest brutality" gets him the status of a demi-god for the savages. While the Company agents hide their greed and lust under the name of trade, Kurtz openly pursues his passion of collecting ivory even at the cost of violence and bloodshed. His charisma and ability to lead men helps him control and rule the natives with a free hand and his eloquence and power with words obscures the horrifying messages of his writing. The severed human heads displayed on a pole outside the station house show the physical picture of terror and horror that Kurtz has created but this contrasts with the more subtle and sinister ways in which the Company

slyly operates to dehumanize the natives. In fact the novelist brings Marlow and Kurtz face to face to allow the process of realization and acknowledgement of evil to take place. Marlow witness a degenerate and megalomaniac Kurtz as opposed to his image in the eyes of people including his fiancée Intended who will think of him as a gentleman of many talents. Marlow can see how the darkness of the savage world has wreaked havoc on the soul of Kurtz. When he meets him, Kurtz is miserably ill. As he carries him along, Kurtz dies on his way back to the civilized world, but not before he speaks his last famous words- "The Horror! The Horror!" In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said offers his personal take on the way darkness has been projected in the novel:

> *Kurtz and Marlow acknowledge the darkness, the former as he is dying, the latter as he reflects retrospectively on the meaning of Kurtz's final words. They (and of course Conrad) are ahead of their time in understanding that what they call "the darkness" has an autonomy of its own, and can reinvade and reclaim what imperialism has taken for its own. But Marlow and Kurtz are also creatures of their time and cannot take the next step, which would be to recognize that what they saw, disablingly and disparagingly, as a non-European "darkness" was in fact a non-European world resisting imperialism so as one day to regain sovereignty and independence. (Said 30)*

Of course, the characters need to take the next step of acknowledging the darkness of the savage world as a form of resistance, but it is encouraging to find that they have already taken the first step to turn inward and explore the darkness of the heart. The two characters Marlow and Kurtz have been portrayed as mirror reflections where the former though fascinated by the overbearing and awe-inspiring figure of the latter, causes the process of realization to initiate in him. Kurtz

can see the horror of it all and Marlow in turn is burdened with the moral responsibility to repeat the tale of his experiences to those who will listen. He is like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner who seeks redemption through narrating what befell him.

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