

## Joseph Conrad's Didactic Intention in *Heart of Darkness*

Fawzia Fathema

Lecturer  
Department of English Language and Literature  
International Islamic University Chittagong

---

**Abstract:** Conrad's genius lies in penetrating the human psychology as well as he lets the door of conscience open before the people who want to ignore it. This is Conrad's Art, to whom "Life for Art's sake". This essay endeavors to explore the moral intonations, the causes behind some typical inhuman attitude which has been practiced by and established by universally approved (!) civilized nations in the world. Like Africa, we also have, ignorance, animal-like attitude, primitiveness and dark unknown self, which we try to deny or keep hidden. But our conscience never changes, with the change of time. Of course, here, in this novel, he being a political refugee, focused and appealed, not only to the conscience of the whites or colonizers, also to the conscience of the Blacks, the colonized mass at large.

---

Genius is "an infinite capability for taking pains" (The History Of Frederic II Of Prussia Called Frederic The Great, By Thomas Carlyle) Hugh Clifford in his lecture, (A Talk On Joseph Conrad and His Work) said, "genius transcends mere talent or ability through its power to work miracles – to achieve as it were by instinct". To him Conrad is a "... a genius that ripened slowly ripened late". (A Talk On Joseph Conrad, Page -42). It is because; he mastered the English language thoroughly at his twenty years old. This genius to most of the critics stands out as the greatest writers of sea-tales of all time. Until his death he was unmistakably a seaman, could be attributed as "a son of the sea" (Page-33.). But to utter surprise, Conrad was the native of a land without any seaboard. So it was simply the command of an "inner voice" which made him a wanderer of the sea.

The didactic writing has almost lost its literary appeal to the modern readers. Subjectivity is almost considered as a negative approach among the critics as having a moral or instructive tone, is conceived as a child like approach. Writers, however, cannot but admit that, out of some good impulse or humane instinct, they convey their, yearning, sympathy, passion and passion in their writing. Joseph Conrad has dared to construct that art in a different track and thereby having a worldwide recognition.

*Heart of Darkness*, the very master piece Of Joseph Conrad is also based on his practical experience in African region, especially during his voyage to Congo River. Apparently, this novel deals with racism, White's oppression, on the Blacks, White's deception, Black's ignorance, that means, the salient issues comprising the very term Postcolonial features at large. Here in this article, I would put emphasis on the embedded intonation of this novella which really strikes a burning blow on the chord of universal humanity.

It is undeniable that to conceive Conrad's themes we have to study his life. He was born in Poland while it was a Russian dominion, in an aristocratic family that had suffered much. After the death of his parents he was to be reared by his uncle wandered about the unknown seas and countries. Marlow, the protagonist of the novel, said, "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps". (Page-23). Conrad himself admits, "I have tried with an almost filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple man ... .." (PR-xvii, Joseph Conrad: His Outlook on Life, Page-110). The same thing is found from the voice of John Herman Rendall, "The sea, the ships and preeminently, the man, who use them- these are the materials of Conrad's genius".

John Cowper Powys said, "No English modern writer, except the great, the unequalled Hardy, has the power which Conrad has, of conveying to the mind that close indescribable intimacy between humanity's passions and the little inanimate things which have surrounded us from childhood" (Page-104; Essays On Conrad and Wild) . The novel, *Heart of Darkness*, also, is not different. He enquired about the genuineness in every professional. Even a seaman also should have some genuine

fascination, that is, they should be wanderer; they should not be as such that, “home is always with them” (Page-19). A seaman cannot have a “disdainful ignorance” towards the foreign shores rather, to Conrad, “there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it is the sea itself”. (Page-20).

It is Conrad, who with an artistry provides his philosophy of life through an interpretation of his wide experience. Therefore, to John Herman, his insight into the meaning of the sea is greater than his insight into human nature. In this novel, he says,

“The yearns of seaman have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical, and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, ... .. are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine”. (Page-20). Really through the illumination of moonlight, though fake, we grow curious about its source like a gorgeous envelop.

Conrad’s provoking skill is also prevalent in his very title, *Heart of Darkness*. Here the very preposition, ‘of’ is raising some confusion –whether it should have been ‘in’ or the title should have been like this, Heart in Darkness or Darkness in Heart? According to Conrad, “My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel- it is before all, to make you see”(Page-112,His Outlook on Life). Here he has not only hinted at the action and reaction of others, rather, to one’s own unknown or unconscious self or a newly discovered self. Here Marlow’s speech unfolds his confession while he could discover a morally declining self,

“I’ve had to resist and attack sometimes-that’s the only way of resisting-without counting the exact cost, according to the demands of such sort of life as I had blundered into.” Again, he added, “... I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly”. (Page-33)

Thus from outer station, that is, the mind of others he had entered peeped into the inner station, that means, the heart of darkness which seems to encompass the souls of both Marlow and Kurtz. About Kurtz we are told that, “His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines”. (Page-101). Like Thomas Browne, Saul Below, a contemporary American writer, used Africa as an unknown, inner territory and wrote, “Well, may be every guy has his own Africa”.(Page-66, York notes)

The story of the Congo voyage starts as a part of another story, in which the narrator himself is a crew and with others were on board of the ship, Nellie on the river, Thames. Marlow, the mouth piece of the author, one of the crews, started telling the story of the voyage to Congo. Here we are introduced to different characters, and through soliloquies, psychoanalysis, asides, imageries the author has conveyed the pursued focus.

However, at the beginning, he had to undergo all official formalities to manage an appointment in a voyage to Africa and accordingly he had to go to Belgian office for performing the subsequent procedures. There he met two women-one was slim, working sincerely; the other was fat, not so diligent, but was true to White’s cause. We may quote from the text, “She glanced at me over the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me”. (Page-26) Truly, the colonizers could reap their ‘harvest,’ i.e, their dominance on Blacks. This fat woman through her unconcerned glance scrutinized every visitors whether they would disprove their make-belief theory about ‘dark’ people. The slim woman like Boxer in Animal Farm, was simply doing her duty, not being conscious of any purpose whether it is moral or immoral. Both these two types of employees are found to serve this kind of evil purpose. As Conrad said, “they are guarding the door of darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall” (Page-27 Ist para). Through this wonderful symbol, ‘warm pall’ he has made us see into the fact that the whites are representing the Blacks to be barbaric, ignorant, beast like, weaker and less humane even like a dead body still they have no change who are covered by White’s Oriental outlook.

According to the procedure, Marlow had to undergo some medical examination and there the doctor asked him, “Ever any madness in the family”? (Page-28). Thus we are showed here that, this Congo is not a place to be fascinated or to wander about. Rather, it is simply ‘wild’ and hostile to them. And, they had employed these people only to prove this falsity before the world. Here we can quote from the doctor’s own reply, “This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency”. (Page- 28).

Nevertheless, critics have always emphasized on the fact that, that the message given by the Whites about the Blacks is just the opposite of what they (Black) really are. Notably, Conrad wants to discover why the Blacks are accepting and facilitating them? Are they really weaker/ or inhumane? – to answer these questions he has given some comments about the Blacks in the novel, ‘Heart of Darkness’, “they had bone, muscle a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural true as the surf along their coast”(Page-30). Even though they, like the women, “... live in a world of their own, there had never been anything like it, and never can be”. (Page-29)

Besides, to the Blacks, these White people are “something like a lower sort of apostle” (Page-29). In Christianity, also, Blacks are believed to be cursed by God and Whites are blessed, that’s why, to the Blacks, they are inferior to Whites; they obey them blindly. On the contrary, knowing all these Whites are simply maximizing the chance. The manager in the novel said, “Anything-anything can be done here”.(Page-54) Under the name of ‘civilization’ or ‘enlightenment’, they are compelling the Blacks to do such unnecessary works like blasting of a hill or digging hole on the slope of the hills. Here Marlow comments, “It might have been connected with the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals something to do”.(Page-34)

Later, when those Black fellows being physically exhausted, lay between the trees, Conrad, then, used the term, “inferno”. Readers are supposed to be wondered at this that what is death to the Blacks, that is ‘work’ for them. Such a dialogue is also made by the whites that, “the work was going on” (Page-34).

Conrad attempted to discover the reason behind, diagnose the white’s cautiously unconscious attitude towards the Blacks and unfolded it to the readers through a wonderful portrait. Here the portrait represents on a black background a blindfolded woman is bearing torchlight with a sinister face. To some critic, this woman represents the white agents who are blindfolded biased by their employers to see, or do work according to the given command; in spite of having eyes they cannot see; though they assert that they are the pathfinders to the way of ‘enlightenment’ or civilization. To another school of thought, the woman stands for the ignorant or so called educated Blacks who despite their education or conscience, are blinded by their inferiority complex, religious superstition or social prejudice ,that is, the Whites deserve to dominate them because of their whiteness and vice versa.

It should be noted here that when the Black cannibals were hungry enough, they did not attack any white ,as we find in the text, “Why... .. they did not go for us-they were thirty to five... .. they were big powerful man” (Page-65). Conrad himself answered,

“Yes; I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weakness, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity, Restraint!...” (Page-66)

Obviously, this is such a thing which has been making them ever submissive and loyal to the Whites, that is, blind religious devotion. For this religion they wanted to keep Kurtz in their land only to observe that ‘unspeakable’ rite. Readers might misunderstand that, the natives, at the end of the novel, had dared to attack the White’s ship in which Marlow, manager, and others were on board. But the conversation between the Russian and Marlow we are informed that, it is Kurtz who had ordered the natives to attack and accordingly, the Blacks only for the religion’s sake , had undertaken everything since Kurtz was not only a white also their Lord.

However, how the readers would be convinced by the fact that, the White people, working in Congo region, whom Marlow met, did not indeed come with the intention of establishing any political authority. Rather, they are like the Romans, never thought Congo worthy of being a colony. Again if really not, why they are suppressing them in such a way that, the dead body under the grave made the earth’s surface swollen like an ‘overheated catacomb’. This needs some psychological study.

The proverb goes that, Might is right. If A honours B, at the very first acquaintance, without any self interest, then, A will not only undermine B, also, would establish many notions about him (B), though they might not be true. As a result, A, being struck by the very underestimation, would, not only be disheartened, also, from then on, he would be suffering from some inferiority complex. Women have been being suppressed in this way. Also the Black people, have been accepting White’s imperial attitude. whereas, Whites finding them submissive; ignorant of civil decency; dogmatically religious, grow imperialistic. Notably, when Conrad had written this novel, then it was the age of imperialism. British empire had almost spread throughout Europe Asia, and Africa.

Admittedly, Conrad portrays the view of British imperialism through the character of Marlow also, who is glad to see the 'vast amount of red' on the map, indicating the British territory. In fact true imperial approach is given by Mr. Manager and Mr. Kurtz. The skulls hung around Kurtz's cottage not only showed his necessary imperial velour ,even he went farther by presiding "at some midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" (Page-76). Like an autocrat he seemed to deny the fact that he was going to die or he could no longer be the chief of the central station of Congo; nor could he be the lord of the natives of this region. He had become so crazy that he wanted to flee away while Marlow and others were taking him back to Europe due to his illness. Even he threatened the Manager by saying that,

"Sick! Sick! Not so sick as you would like to believe. Never mind. I'll carry my ideas out yet –I will return. I will show you what can be done. ... .. you are interfering with me. I will return. I ..."

(Page-92).

Then Marlow replies, " he is very low"(Page-92). But the manager was really envious of Mr. Kurtz and after Kurtz's death, he said, "The manager was very placid, he had no vital anxieties now, ... .."

(Page-99).

Thus the Whites are not only satisfied with the resources they grab from developing or colonized, especially Black people, rather, they want to make them psychologically handicapped by establishing false notions about them like Orientalism. We would like to quote from Edward Said.. he said, Orientalism is not something conceptualized by the Orientals, rather, it is the very outlook established by the Western people about the Orientals.

Thus a thorough reading of the novel ,not only provide us 'goodness' in Black people or 'badness ' in White people, also we have some latent truth about the Blacks, that is , they are also responsible for their sufferings, since they " are out of it"(rationality), like the women. Besides, he had also presented before us the very goodness in White people, like the Russian, Marlow and Kurtz . Though Conrad's novel has hardly any climax, yet, in *Heart of Darkness* the readers may encounter a dramatic fall of such a 'remarkable man' who deliberately uttered, "the horror! The horror!" (Page-101) in a repenting mood.

Modernism is not concerned about men's ethical development whereas, it is the sole purpose of didactic literature. Joseph Conrad, the wanderer of individual's mind, "is an artist with a conscience" (Page-123, Joseph Conrad: His Outlook on Life). In this essay, John Herman concluded, to him, "Life for art's sake" (Page-123). This is because, "but truth – truth stripped of its cloak of time. ... ..He must meet that truth with his own true stuff-with his own inborn strength." (Page- 59).

#### REFERENCES

- [1] *Heart Of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, ISBN:984-643-149-9
- [2] Sir Hugh Clifford, A Talk on Joseph Conrad, a lecture delivered to the Ceylon Branch
- [3] John Herman Randall, *Joseph Conrad: His Outlook on Life*
- [4] Conrad in the Public Eye, Edited by John G Peters
- [5] *Henderson the Rain King*(1959) by Saul Below
- [6] Critical Responses to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* by Av: Morgan Stevenson, Souderton's University.
- [7] Hawthorn, Jeremy. The Women of *Heart of Darkness* (1990) in *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition*.