



**Peer Reviewed Referred and
UGC Listed Journal
(Journal No. 40776)**



ISSN 2277 - 5730

**AN INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY
QUARTERLY RESEARCH JOURNAL**

AJANTA

**Volume-VII, Issue-IV
October - December - 2018
English Part - VII / VIII**

IMPACT FACTOR / INDEXING

2018 - 5.5

www.sjifactor.com

Ajanta Prakashan

ISSN 2277 - 5730
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Volume - VII

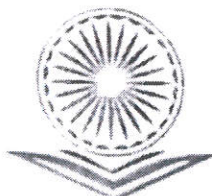
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ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

IMPACT FACTOR / INDEXING

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Ajanta Prakashan

Aurangabad. (M.S.)



❧ CONTENTS OF ENGLISH PART - VIII ❧

Sr. No.	Name & Author Name	Page No.
1	Studies on Marketing of Milk Products in Ambarnath Landge S. N.	1-9
2	Effect of Alcohol on Personality Characteristics of Respondents Dr. Quadri Syed Javeed Mr. Bhagwat Ankush Karadkar	10-15
3	Innate Longing for Freedom in Manju Kapur's Novel Custody Ms. Mayuri L. Waghmare	16-18
4	Biographical Elements in Alex La Guma's A Walk in the Night Mr. Wasudeo Nagsen Chinchkhede	19-23
5	Food and Nutrition System Approaches in Tackling Hidden Hunger Dr. Maya Sanjay Khandat	24-30
6	Reflection of Race and Cultural Conflict in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness Ashish Gajendra Hangargekar	31-37

6. Reflection of Race and Cultural Conflict in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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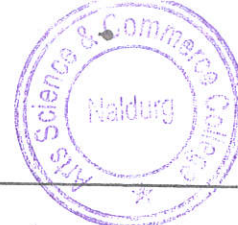


Abstract

The two continents, African and European have been in conflict for centuries and their enmity and aggression have taken from two distinct perspectives. The African continent, especially at the beginning of the exploration of Africa was connected with negative aspects of the country from a European perspective, such as savagery, primitiveness, inferiority, political instability. As it is described in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness by the narrator Marlow travelling along the Congo River, Africa is a 'dark place' of the earth. On the contrary, European Continent, namely the Western World is as if looked through Eurocentric perception is connected with science, development rationality etc. Eurocentrism is a way of looking the world from a European point of view. The peak point Euro centrism is the construction of European Ego. And it looks down upon the others who are expected to suffer from a sense of inferiority.

Keywords: Eurocentrism, Greek heritage, Western identity, hierarchy

The novel reflects the cultural identity of the society it was written in, through its construction of race gender, class and ethnicity. There has been a widely held assumption about the cultural superiority of the Western World because of the Greek heritage which Europeans claim as their own. They lay claim that there is something special about the West, its history, its culture, and its ways of dealing with the natural and the social world. Ancient Greek stories that glorify these cultural achievements have been widely read adopted while constructing the West's sense of a superior identity. Even today, the Greek legacy is still believed to be fundamental in the definition of Western identity. Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad is a recount of Marlow's journey through Africa. It is seen by some as a critique of the colonialism that was being undertaken by Europeans in the 19th century. While it may not defend all the aspects of its society, it is possible to gain an understanding of the dominant values and attitudes that prevailed during this period, by studying the novel's portrayal of women and Africans and the self image of



its characters as a reflection of their ethnicity. The impression that the reader is given throughout *Heart of Darkness* is the superiority of the European culture over that of the African's. Marlow draws a distinction between the invasion of England by the Romans and the invasion of Africa.

The fundamental ideology behind the Eurocentric vision bases upon some points such as Western philosophy and science which are claimed to be reasonable modes of thought. They are developed by the Westerners as the unconditioned truths. It was in Ancient Greece where the first trials of these sciences took place and then were inherited by the Westerners. It has been constantly claimed by the European historians that only the West inherited the Greek legacy by means of an independent and continuous historical tradition. The word "Eurocentrism" refers to a particular European self-understanding that proclaims and justifies the supremacy of European civilization. It is a system and intellectual convention imposed upon others to pave the way for. With the passage of time it became associated with imperialism, exploitation, and the promotion of greed. The opposition between European and African countries marked a shocking, traumatic, and tragic confrontation. It resulted in racial prejudices, hatred and discrimination.

Joseph Conrad has been one of the most controversial literary figures. Conrad's novel also directly and indirectly influenced many postcolonial writers such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Gayatri Spivak. He wrote *Heart of Darkness* at a time of European colonial expansion. Conrad's critics illustrate many different responses to *Heart of Darkness*. It is simply related to the stance each critic takes in the discussion upon this novel. The diversity of their criticism results from the ambivalence of Conrad's position as a writer and his approach to controversial issues of the nineteenth century, such as colonialism, imperialism and racism.

Colonialism, imperialism, and racism are few of the major themes of the novel. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: [Marlow] presents imperialism at its most horrific and ugly moment. He builds the western belief about natives in the way they are described through Conrad's eyes: dark, mysterious, weak, threatening, unconscious, and lacking comprehensible speech. Edward Said derives two different discussions about the novel in his essay "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*". In one of these arguments, he implies that despite leaving their old colonies, Westerners "retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually" (Edward W. Said



,P 123). Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* writes that: Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end (Said, 25)

Heart of Darkness is a great and powerful depiction about what is said before. It was set in the Congo of the 19th century. At that time Britain was the greatest power because it controlled most of the territories in the world and especially in Africa. Kurtz has traveled to Africa in order to bring enlightenment to the savages and see through his ideas of advancing their culture. Marlow witnessed illness and humanity, people who suffered under the white empire and treated as machines. He described the black Congolese who were ill-treated when they were forced to do hard work and enchained at the same time to each other and this is slavery. So; blacks were forced to do hard labor especially in agriculture or in building for example railways because white colonizers believed that blacks were better at doing hard works than them. Marlow faced horror and fear because he was not able to believe in what he had seen that is why his description was filled with images of darkness. Although he surrenders to madness, Marlow respects him because of his dedication to his ideas. It is clear that the Europeans regarded themselves and their ideas in higher regard than the African lifestyle.

The text describes the portrayal of the European culture as 'civilized' and progressive. Africans are presented as ignorant and savage. It shows high regard the Europeans held about their own culture and the disregard they had for anything that was Conrad. Contrary to the depiction of the heroic character, Marlow, as 'the self', the representatives of Africa, especially the chained slaves of the Congo River, are presented as inferior objects: Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck: And all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung, between them, rhythmically clinking (Conrad, 17).

It can be said that Conrad and Said believed in Europe and something that might be called the European idea. They also kept on stressing that the idea was paradoxical, and that it informs and at the same time contradicts itself. This sensitivity to the paradoxical nature of the



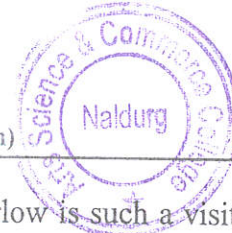
European narrative was, strictly autobiographical and related to their own experiences of 'life-in-exile'. It had to do with their threatened identities, with all the moments when your self is questioned and suspended – they found the same terrifying sentiments in the 20th-century Europe, the Europe that lost its links with its past and had its identity put into question. The latter should not be disregarded: it adds a genuine happy ending to both biographies. Heart of Darkness gave too much importance to the pretexts of civilization which were used in order to hide the real aims of colonialism. When the colonizers suggested that the real goals of colonialism were to help the black Africans who were considered as a backward people. It described the Africans who were the victims of European supremacy and their economic growth, so the use of race and racism helped them in their mission. The rise of European expansionism and imperialism in Africa led to the expansion of racist ideologies because imperialists were obliged to use such racist methods in order to achieve their goals. As illustrated above in the portrayals of black people who are used for the railway construction, these are the slaves living in poor conditions as 'the other'. The image of Africa portrayed in Heart of Darkness is an image of another world and an opposite image of Western civilization. In other words, it is the encounter between the 'self/Us' and the 'other/Them' as described by Achebe: 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 (wildness)...(Achebe, 1).

Racism is an act of showing difference between people according to their race. It means that a particular race of a particular country viewed as superior to the other races in the world. It also paves way prejudice, violence, dislike and discrimination or oppression, also this kind of superiority is generally based on skin color, but sometimes it is considered as a kind of discrimination against a particular race's culture, belief or traditions. As it is known, people in our world are divided into different races: whites, blacks, red, yellow, and so, this ill-treatment commonly is practiced by the powerful races because they believe that they possess different abilities and different characteristics, which are determined by race. The racist powers use different strategies or ideologies in order to put down the power of the other races, by making them less human or inferior, so they can criticize their religion, their culture or traditions and even their way of behaving.



The priority is given to European superiority instead of handling both European and African values equally. Black people are presented in such a humiliating way that they are likened to wild creatures living in a jungle and called 'cannibals'. Despite including references to cannibalism several times, Marlow never sees the Africans do anything cannibalistic in reality. He often depicts the Africans as if they were cannibals: 'Twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing. Fine fellows-cannibals-in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them' (Conrad, 43-44).). Because it is the general tendency of the Eurocentric perception towards Africa, Africans are presented with all possible negatives. Edward Said puts forth the idea that European superiority or hegemony ignores the 'others/Them' and adopts a Western perspective which permits Kurtz's imperial acts. He writes as a man whose Western view of the non-Western world is so ingrained as to blind him to other histories, other cultures, other aspirations. All Conrad can see is a world totally dominated by the Atlantic West, in which every opposition to the West only confirms the West's wicked power. What Conrad cannot see is an alternative to this cruel tautology. What Conrad cannot see is an alternative to this cruel tautology. He could neither understand that India, Africa, and South America also had lives and cultures with integrities not totally controlled by the gringo imperialists and reformers of this world, nor allow himself to believe that anti-imperialist independence movement were not all corrupt and in the pay of the puppet. The setting of the novel is described as a strategic place by the Thames outside London from which the story of savagery, wilderness, barbarism and primitiveness is narrated by the spokesperson of the great European civilization. It is a perspective of the point of view from which the Western civilization looks down on the Africans. When Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, there was a growing European interest in remote and virgin land which could be exploited economically. The period marks imperialistic expansionism of the European core towards the virgin periphery. The result became colonialism in Africa which is exemplified by the undeniable white presence there. It was at this time that colonialism reached its peak.

Slavery was accepted as an established institution and was considered to be a rightful action by the white man who was then considered to be the only representative of human civilization. The novel may seem to claim a Eurocentric point of view because it is based on the depiction of a white observer of the dark African environment. The darkness is ironic in that the European eye is not yet used to perceiving the darkness with the European eyes that are



trained in using the light in order to distinguish details. The European Marlow is such a visitor who needs some time to get his eyes adjusted to see the facts that lie underneath the domineering darkness. If the novel is claimed to be Eurocentric, it is to a certain extent, but only superficially observing the other land with eyes that have not adopted the required capability to see deeply into it. Marlow as the narrator needs to spend some time in order to see or perceive the environment by adopting an African perspective and by adapting himself to the reality of this environment. Therefore, the novel is Eurocentric in the first phase when Marlow reaches Africa and starts his journey along the Congo River. The more he proceeds with his journey, the darker it gets. However, the more he covers distance, the better he begins to see in darkness. After being able to penetrate into the depth of the utter darkness, he could see and understand better the devastation of the black people: They were dying slowly-it was very clear.

However, during the journey, the transformation of Kurtz into becoming what once he has been "a primeval being" demonstrates to what extent the European lens projects the African reality. Conrad's approach to the African reality is not racist but it is Eurocentric until Marlow proceeds halfway through on the Congo River. However, it is ultimately artistic which yields deep psychological aspiration on the transformation of a European who has been brought up with the myth of European civilization but who remains utterly inarticulate at the moment when he falls into the depths of his eternal darkness. The idea of progress, which had been a dominant idea in European thought for the past four hundred years, and to question the very foundations of Western civilization. It shows the antagonistic interests of civilization and colonialism, portrays the disastrous clash between the white man and the African, and suggests the humane values that are needed to survive this conflict. Marlow, who represents the European conscience that Kurtz has abandoned in the depths of the jungle, measures colonial experience in human and moral terms. Europeans and especially during the 19th century were interested in gaining more and more resources and wealth without giving importance to how they did it which means self interest. The best reason was that Africans were treated as animals or let's say as savages or criminals because European countries believed that Africa was a dark continent where there was neither civilization nor religion. So, it can be noticed that colonialism in Africa in the 19th century based its actions on racism, racial discrimination and segregation because colonizers were interested on gaining wealth and raw materials. The orient is positioned into an inferior place to justify the mission to civilize those inhuman African natives.



To conclude, the European vision has been formed using the superiority of one race. It indisputably places the white race over the rest of the savages that were located in an invisible periphery of a center that was purely white. This vision was blocked by European privileges, such as imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. As one moves away from the center, the racial color scale begins to get darker, eventually becoming purely black. As consequences of these European systems, Eurocentrism imposed exploitation, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

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