

Deconstructing the Idea of Civilization in Heart of Darkness: A Postcolonial Critique



<u>Inayat Ur Rehman</u>	M.Phil Scholar English Department Qurtuba University of Science and information Technology Peshawar thecouncil345@gmail.com
<u>Azmat Ali Khan</u>	M.Phil Scholar English Department Qurtuba University of Science and information Technology Peshawar Azmatalikhan288@gmail.com
<u>Aqrab Ullah</u>	BS English linguistics and literature FATA University FR Kohat aqrabullah65@gmail.com
<u>Amina Hayat</u>	BS English Qurtuba University of Science and information Technology Peshawar zee9584567@gmail.com

Abstract: *This research study technically incorporates a postcolonial lens to critically analyze the pervasive notion of civilization in Joseph Conrad's seminal masterpiece in English literature Heart of Darkness. This primarily employs the tool of deconstruction explicitly demystifies the glorified narratives and ideologies lurking in the shadows of the western civilization or enlightenment. This study has masterfully employed a qualitative, postcolonial methodology, intensively focusing on the framework of Orientalism, introduced by Edward W. Said. The central objective inextricably tied to this study is to critically analyze the idea of civilization in Heart of Darkness, highlighting the mechanics behind the Conrad's narratives, challenging the very essence of ravaging evil of colonialism. The findings offer an indispensable insight into the Conrad's narratives technically harnessed to sabotage the dominant Western notion of civilization. This research study concludes that the novella the Heart of Darkness, undoubtedly, demonstrates a complex and refined imagery of civilization, reflecting the ambiguous and oppressed corpus of western civilization.*

Keywords: *Heart of Darkness, Civilization, Disillusionment of Civilization, Glorious idea, Eurocentrism, Strategic essentialism, Reductionism. Oppressed Corpus of Western Civilization, and Capitalistic savagery and Essential turmoil*

Introduction

Heart of Darkness, a seminal masterpiece, created by *Joseph Conrad*, casts aspersion on the notion of civilization and its underlying values through the journey of the *Marlow*, the protagonist of the thought-provoking novella, deeply exploring the pathetic and vicious aspects of human nature. This also brings forth the darkness enmeshed within human nature, reflecting the devastating ramifications unleashed through the *dehumanizing* and *manipulative* practices of civilization.

Joseph Conrad, technically speaking, portrays

the *disillusionment of civilization* impinged upon the black people by the Western imperial elites, struggling unflinchingly to infuse the *notion of enlightenment* into the primitive and uncivilized Africa. Marlow's journey has been portrayed as a process of disillusionment, as he consistently grapples with the inevitable and harsh realities of colonization and the darkness within human nature. This *enlightenment* was an *imperial evil*, lurking under the garb of *civilizing mission* espoused by the Kurtz, a complex and enigmatic figure of this novella. Joseph Conrad has labelled this impending notion of civilization as just an illusion, unveiling the

despicable hypocrisy of civilized society, especially, in the context of colonialism (Conard, 2017).

A more revealing and convincing example of the failure of the *glorious idea* is the noteworthy grove scene where Marlow, the protagonist of the novella, finds, to his horror, a group of dying laborers.

"Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dimly excavated dens, the sunken graves, or in the colorless gloom."

This scene gives a crystal-clear picture, a striking *antithesis* of the enlightenment notion as glorious idea.

Contextually speaking, the Western imperial design was covertly commissioned by the colonial elites to rob and murder in the name of enlightenment or the glorious idea. In reality, this glorious idea of infusing Western values was no more than a hypocritical and *heinous* exercise choreographed mercilessly. This hypocritical exercise on part of the colonizers has been explicitly critiqued as:

" The machinery and railways do not bring improvement

but calamity to the natives, and instead of the saviors,

the colonialists are the devil that makes Africa into an earthly hell.'

Joseph Conrad has prolifically highlighted the fact that this civilization had its crystal clear reflection in the narratives projected and espoused by the *white man folks* (Cun, 2017).

" Marlow's aunt told him it was a glorious idea, they would

bring civilization to the black world Africa, employing the

hard power of thunder and lightning, metaphorically used for guns and bullets".

Joseph Conrad technically reflects the *de-humanizing* attitude and darkness *genetically* enshrined in Western materialistic culture, corrupting the very essence of the Congolese

culture via *capitalist spirit* and moral corruption. These abominable colonial practices heightened the notion of *Eurocentric vision*, keeping the Congolese as a tool for their capitalist ventures. This exploitation on part of the capitalists is inextricably tied to the well-known saying espoused by *Karl Marx* as:

" Capitalist use the poor family's children as an Instrument for labor."

Contextually speaking, after employing *literary Marxism*, it can be argued with a strong conviction that the act of savagery unleashed by the White people towards indigenous Congolese is intrinsically tied to the capitalist culture of the west, spotlighting the merciless nature of the culture of exploitation and alienation. This *capitalistic savagery* and moral corruption can be observed transparently in the jungle of the *Congo River* where Kurtz, a complex and enigmatic figure of this novella, categorically ends up losing all moral codes of conduct and integrity and becomes a vicious savage.

This horrifying scenario exacerbated by the evils of criminality, ineffectiveness, capitalist spirit, and moral corruption finds its true and transparent picture in a statement promulgated by *Murfin* as:

" The criminality and inefficiency and pure selfishness

when tackling the civilizing work in Africa.'

Under the merciless garb of *civilizing mission*, Congo, was credited with a misleading stigma of '*tenebrous land*', *a region afflicted with the contagion of savagery and the primitivism of the indigenous people*. To do away with these evils, the theory of the civilizing mission was harnessed by the colonizers reflected in the character of *Kurtz*, portraying Africa as the heart of darkness and Africans as *uncivilized* individuals who are morally obligated to be inculcated with immediate enlightenment parameters imposed by the Europeans. These so-called *anti-African narratives* finds places in the *denigrating* stereotypes forcefully imposed by the Western imperialists.

" Africa is merely the fictional projection of a

in which Europe is the only truth.''

The charitable ambition on part of the Kurtz, a colonial mouthpiece, to help the natives, "uncivilized" and "the criminals" totally transformed into massive violence exercised on them by the self-proclaimed benefactors and merciless exploiters in the garb of capitalists (Deena, 1997).

"...we approach them with the might as of a deity...by the simple exercise of our will can exert a power"

The central message conveyed through the character of Kurtz in the novella *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilization is *at base as barbarous as African society*. This argument is credited with a well-known postcolonial theorist, Terry Eagleton as he meticulously brings this point home that colonizers were hell-bent on to disguise their nasty roles in occupied territories as *liberators, altruistic or missionaries*, curtailing and suppressing Congolese identity, ancestral roots and desires to go along with their traditional norms and ideologies. Joseph Conrad has masterfully represented Kurtz, a complex and enigmatic figure of the novella *Heart of Darkness*, as the *Homo duplex*, demonstrating the dual combination of primitive and civilizing norms within an individual; he is weary in his civilized composition and enjoys his times in *Homo simplex*, predominantly compels him to go according to his *primordial and ill-developed self*. Kurtz was in true sense employing the process of oppressive corpus of western civilization, some well thought-out modus operandi through which Europeans imposed their culture, values, and ideologies upon the Africans with devastating consequences.

This dilemma on part of the Kurtz compels him to impinge upon the merciless episodes of savage treatment of the Congo black community, defaming the notion of enlightenment or civilization (Gul, 2023).

The false and derisive perception of civilization and enlightenment undoubtedly, serves to justify their denigrating and oppressive practices,

perpetuating a dynamic cycle of violence, savagery, and exploitation. This falls in the discourses of *the illusion of civilization*, an idea inextricably conforms to Western colonial powers unflinchingly perpetuate a facade of civility, modernization, and moral dominancy while actively engaging both on overt and covert fronts to brutalize and exploit the indigenous Congolese culture and identity, leading to *existential uncertainty* and turmoil, unconscious fear, and deep-seated apprehension. The *existential turmoil* in the novella implies the inner struggles and crisis of the protagonist, Marlow, as he navigates through the Congo River and grapples with the darkness of human nature.

This whole scenario can be clearly reflected in the W.B. Yeats famous poem " *The second coming* " asserts about power and perception (Yasmin, 2020):

*" Things Fall Apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosened upon the world."*

Marlow has prolifically critiqued the dark side of civilization by uncovering the *pervasive hypocrisy* and *false-esteem* glorified by the Western imperialists, labelling this evil of civilization as *cannibalism* of the black people.

" The actual savagery is hidden under the garb of civilizing mission

and the real darkness lies in the heart covered with the white skin."

This intolerable savagery unleashed by the evil forces of civilization strikes at the very roots of African traditional norms and ideologies, reshaping their vulnerable identity as per *Eurocentric imperial design*. In fact, lust for ultimate and dominating power, jealousy, and despicable greed for *Ivory* have led the colonizers towards their horrifying transformation into corrupt and loathsome beings in the very eyes of the indigenous black people. These abominable ramifications can be observed in the character of Kurtz as Marlow's words (Gupta, 2022):

" All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz."

In this novella titled "Heart of Darkness", Joseph Conrad had spotlighted the concept of *reductionism* on part of the Western imperialists, reducing black people into a state of savagery. It explicitly critiques the dehumanizing tactics employed by the Kurtz, giving a strong reflection of loss of humanity, rationality, empathy, and compassion. These further give a strong impetus to the racial discrimination, fueling white racism under which the people of color are irrational and less intelligent, less civilized, low born, immoral, and even less attractive than white people (Polhard, 2023).

Civilizing mission was harnessed to characterize the black people as a *low born* species between animal and human beings. This idea had also been introduced by a well-known *postcolonial theorist*, Frantz Fanon in his magnum opus literary masterpiece "black skin, white mask". This mislabeling was skillfully employed as a potent weapon of maintaining power and hegemonic status over the later to confirm the black people identity to the concept of reductionism (Paudel, 2022).

"The characterization of colonized people (Congolese)

as secondary, abject, weak, fragile, feminine, and other to Europe."

Joseph Conrad through his literary acumen labels western hegemonic discourses and narratives operating under the merciless garb of civilizing mission as *deceptive*.

He categorically says that Western ideals and values are deceptive. He openly brings forth the brutal tactics of civilizing mission as:

"In an attempt to bring morality, the civilizing mission brutalizes both

the colonizers and colonized alike due to its essential hypocrisy."

Edward Said, in this regard has actively critiqued the *evil dynamics* running and oiling the wheels of civilization, an offshoot of western imperialism in these words:

"The process of imperialism occurred beyond the levels of economic laws and political decisions."

To pontificate on this logic, it can be inferred that the reality projected by the Western civilization had become an illusion, and the actual address of the darkness metamorphosis to be the heart of civilization.

In the same vein, British itself was a dark territory on the global map in the pages of history. He continues with a classical glorification of imperialism as the 'giver of light' (Guvén, 2018).

Analysis and Discussion

Heart of darkness has been one of the seminal masterpieces written by Joseph Conrad in 1899. This novella categorically spotlights the *notion of civilization* reinforced through different tactics by the Western imperialists reducing the suppressed, voiceless, and colonized into subhuman and savages. This *glorious idea* of enlightening the black Congolese has been depicted in this novella, constructing the very essence of civilization. This construction of civilization has been reinforced and challenged by Joseph Conrad.

This facet of reinforcing the notion of civilization on part of Joseph Conrad has been severely countered and critiqued by a well-known postcolonial theorist namely Chinua Achebe. Chinua Achebe had used the tool of deconstruction, exposing the pessimistic facet of Joseph Conrad, portraying the black people dwelling in the vicinity of Congo River as inhuman and savages. Chinua Achebe has criticized Joseph Conrad owing to his *selective discourses* by keeping the dark pictures of the Congolese in his depiction. Joseph Conrad represents Kurtz as a key symbol of western civilization, providing the glorified and the eternal values with a solemn purpose to transform the decadent values of the black people. On the one hand, Kurtz is symbolically represented as a *beacon of enlightenment* while on the other hands he is portrayed as a savage and brutal intruder, jeopardizing the very fabric of the Congo people.

Joseph Conrad has professionally revealed the pernicious ramifications unleashed by the process of civilization, a *dark underbelly* of colonialism hell-bent on to dehumanize and

marginalize the Congolese under the impending and imposing cultural influences of the colonization. Additionally, through this novella, Conrad has challenged the dominant Western notions, considering it as interests-driven and biased. This dehumanizing tactic of civilization has been demystified through a mechanism known as *decoding the myth of civilization*.

Through this nasty practice, colonizers brutally exploited the black people in the name of *trade* and *exploitation*.

" *In the name of trade and exploration these white men committed*

all sorts of brutalities and cruelty on the African natives."

Conrad has exposed these tactics through his well-crafted symbolism, inextricably linked with the enlightenment enterprise in these words:

" *The sword and the torch through which he is implying the violence*

and brutal practices technically employed by the missionaries of western civilization."

The cardinal objective driving the colonizing venture was to civilize the primitive black people of Africa, weaning those pathetically ignorant and lowborn millions from the horrid ways. These abominable mislabeling has been reflected as:

" *They were reduced to the 'black shadows of disease and starvation',*

Iron-collard and chained."

Joseph Conrad has masterfully employed the tool of *symbolism* to deconstruct the notion of civilization in this novella 'Heart of Darkness'. Under this technique, the symbols of *fog* and *fire*, the author, Joseph Conrad, categorically espouses the idea that civilization or civility should sprout from inside, from the depth of the soul. It has got nothing to do with sophisticated lifestyle or false notion glorified by the *evil* of civilization.

Conclusion

Heart of Darkness, a seminal literary masterpiece, written by Joseph Conrad,

demonstrates a truly complicated and labyrinthine imagery of civilization, both giving impetus to the very essence and presence of colonialism and also challenges the dominating and hegemonic western narratives promulgated by the western imperial elites. This evil process of civilization fortified the concept of *reductionism* through which the colonizers kept the black peoples' identity in check, pushing their ancestral legacy into oblivion. This novella after subjected to the *postcolonial critique*, focuses our attention on the *deconstruction approach* through which the dominating process of enlightenment can be countered and challenged. It can be inferred from this that this novella gives us an ambiguous and *ambivalent perspective* on civilization.

Last but not the least, Joseph Conrad has not only reinforced the process of civilization, a key and cardinal offshoot of colonization but also challenged the notion of civilization in western discourse owing to its debilitating ramifications on the black culture and traditional roots.

Final thought:

This research study is an imperative step to enrich our already existing understanding of the *notion of civilization* or *civilizing mission* and its inextricable connectivity with colonialism and the *grand design* of imperialism. This research critically highlights the narratives reinforced and challenged by Joseph Conrad in connection with the complex nature of the civilization.

Last but not the least, this research study and its key findings will encourage the *mass readers* to think critically about the mechanics already at play, confirming to the fact that civilization, a cardinal dimension of postcolonial studies, had been credited with a well-calculated tool to transform the indigenous culture and its ideologies.

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