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Post Modernism and Post-colonialism in Joseph Conrad selected Novels: A Glimpse

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), is one of those authors who considered the people of colonized countries as savages, barbarians and uncivilized that must be under the colonization and control of the civilized and superior countries like England. Among his works, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)—which is about a sea voyage upward the famous African Congo River toward the Congo Free State—is narrated by the first-person point of view narrator and protagonist named Marlow showing the intention and thoughts of the author about a colonized country. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to study the notion and concept of post-colonialism through the lights of the critics like Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak and Achebe on Joseph Conrad's novel named *Heart of Darkness*. As many other discourses, through the history literature paid one of its most important attentions to show and reveal such mentioned post-colonial characteristics and influences as well. Thus, an actual reader of literature can comprehend the fact that some authors are to be considered as defenders of colonizer countries while some others are on the opposite side and are the defenders of the colonized countries. The first group are called the agents of imperialism while the second group are the defendant of the colonized people.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Imperialism, Colonized Identity, Heart of Darkness

1. INTRODUCTION

Being introduced as a controversial type of literary theory, post-colonialism deals with the literary canon created about the societies which on one occasion were under the colonization of the European imperial powers such as The Great Britain, Spain and France as well as the literary



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canon of decolonised notions. Pramod K. Nayar in *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary* (2015) defines post-colonialism as:

Initially written with a '-' between 'post' and 'colonialism' as a signifier of chronology, the term was originally meant to convey a historical-material change in the political status of a country: 'after colonialism.' But with the 1980s it became identified with a way of reading and interpretation, a theory and a methodology, that examines the nature of Euro-American nations' conquest, domination and exploitation of countries and cultures in South America, Asia, Africa and regions like Canada and Australia. This domination mode of postcolonial inquiry tracks both historically (the period of European empires) and in the contemporary (neocolonialism). Postcolonialism is the academic-cultural component of the condition of postcoloniality. It represents a theoretical approach on the part of the formerly colonized, the subaltern and the historically oppressed, in literary-cultural studies informed by a particular political stance, using the prism of race and the historical context of colonialism, to analyze texts, even as it seeks to produce critical commentary that serves an act of cultural resistance to the domination of Euro-American epistemic and interpretive schemes.ⁱ

The term, post-colonialism, as explained above, reveals its main importance in literature after 1980s when it has been recognised with a way of interpretation and clarification, a philosophy and a procedure scrutinising the Euro-American authority and corruption on South American, Asian, African countries and cultures. In addition to such a kind of explanation regarding post-colonialism, it also explains some other parts which are related to psychological aspects of colonized people. On this regard, it "studies the psychological and cultural impact of colonial rule on the non-European, arguing that the native's subjectivity was itself formed"ⁱⁱ, as what other critics such as Fanon excellently established, "within the violently unstable crucible of colonialism. It seeks to examine the nature of the colonized subject's agency in the face of oppression and dominance. The political position adopted in these interpretations is marked by the commitment to ideas of emancipation, equality and justice"ⁱⁱⁱ. Therefore, by post-colonialism, it is to note that it wants to explore the fact that would come into existence for a colonized man after the period of colonization in the realm of religion, culture, identity, as well as literature as a place of manifestation for all of them.

As mentioned, literature can be considered as the best place of representation of the colonization and its after-effects. When the people of a nation consider a piece of literary work as an authoritative one, it means that they are the followers of ideology and philosophy that the work has. For Conrad, and his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, the same procedure exists.



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Undoubtedly, Conrad can be considered as an author who pays attention to the notion of colonialism as well as post-colonialism and writes his novel in a way that it can be considered as an advocate of colonialism. Therefore, the aim of this article is to clarify and open up the effects of post-colonialism in this novel from the view points of the critics such as Fanon, Said, Spivak and Achebe.

2. METHODOLOGY

For Edward Said, the notion of post-colonialism has its most important emergence because he has made his mind wholeheartedly to demonstrate the fact that, from long time ago, to the present time and maybe for the future, most of the writers from America and Europe, including Joseph Conrad, wanted to change the reality of the colonized people to something which is totally in contrast with their true behavior, culture and identity. In this regard Edward Said philosophically introduced two terms to show that the colonizers want to mentally accept the fact that they are better than the colonized people. In his book *Orientalism* (1987), he stated that:

To describe the *us-and-them* 'binary social relation' with which Western Europe intellectually divided the world—into the 'Occident' and the 'Orient'—developing the denotations and connotations of the term Orientalism (an art-history term for Western depictions and the study of the Orient). This is the concept that the cultural representations generated with the *us-and-them* binary relation are social constructs, which are mutually constitutive and cannot exist independent of each other, because each exists on account of and for the other.^{iv}

Said puts the emphasis on the fact that by the use of the words such as *us* and *them*, the colonizers want to categorize people in accordance with their desires. This is where the notions of occident— western hemisphere; Europe and America—and orient— eastern hemisphere; countries of Asia and Africa— become very important factors in the differentiation between people.

For a critic like Said, at the beginning there were no *The West* and *The East*. When the colonizers of the west, on the behalf of themselves, created such a concept, the east, they wanted to allow “the Europeans to suppress the peoples of the Middle East, of the Indian Subcontinent, and of Asia and Africa, from expressing and representing themselves as discrete peoples and cultures [and] thus conflated the non-Western world into the homogeneous cultural entity known as the East”^v. Therefore, the most important factor in the notion of post-colonialism is to believe that the colonized people are not *us* and they are *others*—the minorities that are not important and they should have no identity of their own.

For Frantz Fanon, this notion is considered to be so destructive. Frantz Fanon in his book



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The Wretched of the Earth (1961), psychologically explained the destructive after-effects of colonialism. He believes that colonialism is harmful to the mentality of native people who were dominated by the destructive power of colonizers and they are marginalized into a very small entity.

He states that:

Its societal effects—the imposition of a subjugating colonial identity—are harmful to the mental health of the native peoples who were subjugated into colonies, [and] ideological essence of colonialism is the systematic denial of ‘all attributes of humanity’ of the colonised people. Such dehumanization is achieved with physical and mental violence, by which the colonist means to inculcate a servile mentality upon the natives. [...] The natives must violently resist colonial subjugation. [...] Violent resistance to colonialism [is] as a mentally cathartic practice, which purges colonial servility from the native psyche, and restores self-respect to the subjugated.^{vi}

As noted above, Fanon believed that the mental destructive effects of post-colonialism will result in taking no notice of all minute parts of humanity, especially for the colonized people. Needless to say, the colonizers are in the quest of dehumanization of the colonized people, and to change them to those who have no power of decision making and logic. He also notes that the colonized must not stay silent in this regard and they have to resist because it is a kind of catharsis for them which can sooth them and help them to free themselves from the prison of being colonized.

Spivak is another critic who deals with the process and the system of colonization. In this regard, he introduced the term of subaltern. In founding the notion of Post-colonialism, he referred to the key term of *Subaltern*, as he states:

[...] *Subaltern* is not just a classy word for ‘oppressed,’ for The Other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie [...]. In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not *subaltern* [...]. Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word subaltern [...]. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern.^{vii}

Spivak, as a post-colonial critics believed that there is no possibility for someone who is



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subaltern to escape from the essentializing aspect of being colonized, or even recover an untainted subaltern cognizance. Spivak contended that subalterns were themselves alienated, potholed and assorted and to infer an unchanging classification of ‘the subaltern’ was to standardize them. Supplementary, subalterns continuously remain the subjects of others’ demonstrations, lacking a social and cultural voice by which to express their own selves.

Therefore, as the critics who focused on the notion of post-colonialism agreed on, the people of colonized countries are going toward the way of not being themselves, having no identity of themselves and thus having no voice. They are going to be marginalized by those colonizers who are trying to convince the colonized people to believe themselves as the people who have no control over their society.

3. FINDING

Many critics and scholars consider Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as the agent of imperialism in postcolonial studies. For instance, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe in public lecture “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (1975), considers this short novel as “an offensive and deplorable book” which is focused on the process of dehumanizing the African people, [introducing and portraying] them as savages, barbarians and uncivilized who must be controlled^{viii}. It is to say that a novelist like Joseph Conrad “blinkerered [...] with xenophobia,” and wrongly portrayed African people and Africa as the opposite of Europe and civilization. Conrad disregarded the artistic and creative achievements of Africans and those who are the native people of the Congo River basin—which is the symbol of Africa^{ix}.

Conrad as a polish novelist, is at the service of colonizers and wants to show a false image of Africa. He tries to “depersonalize a portion of the human race,” in a way that when one reads the novel, he/she thinks that the novel is actually a voyage to the heart of darkness which may has no return and the characters are dealing with very dangerous adventures and situations in which the nature, people and all Africa has, are against them^x. In a passage from *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad writes:

Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell. The dawns were heralded by the descent of a chill stillness; the wood-cutters slept, their fires burned low; the snapping of a twig would make you start. We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the



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droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories^{xi}.

Herewith, Conrad is explaining the voyage to Africa from Congo River as if they are travelling to the past. It is as if they are travelling from civilized lands to uncivilized ones, from humanity to savagery, from logic and knowledge to ignorance, and from peace to war. Conrad wants to put the emphasis on the idea that savagery, ignorance and darkness are taken from the instinct nature of Africa and African people. This is why the Congo River is always wavy and dangerous and the African people (especially native ones) are always wearing no proper cloths; (i.e.) they are not civilized naturally.

The cruel description of Africa and African people even goes to be more horrible when Conrad writes:

You know I am not particularly tender; I've had to strike and to fend off. I've had to resist and to attack sometimes—that's only one way of resisting— without counting the exact cost, according to the demands of such sort of life as I had blundered into. 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. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. For a moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning. Finally I descended the hill, obliquely, towards the trees I had seen. ^{xii}

In this passage, Conrad implies that if someone wants to travel to Africa, he should not be tender and sometimes, he has to fight, attack and strike because of saving his life. He also notes that this is the one and only way of survival. By this, Conrad wants to introduce a new identity for Africa; an identity which is savage and harsh. He also compares the African people and their nature with devil when he describes his confrontation with devilish violence, greed and hot desire. He uses all negative adjectives for the nature and people of Africa to convince the reader that Africa must be colonized in order to be controlled and civilized. Here, a reader should note that this passage refers to the description of African jungles that are pure, untouched and full of



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astounding views and Conrad, instead of describing the beauty of the jungles, portrays a very prejudicial image of Africa in which the sunshine is blinding, trees are devilish, mood is mysterious and the situation has no mercy and pity.

As mentioned, *Heart of Darkness* is full of literal and metaphorical contraries between Europe and Africa which focus on the fact that the earlier is better than the later and the later must take the identity of the earlier. These opposites are the Congo and the Thames, black and white, good and evil, purity and corruption, civilization and triumphant bestiality, the light and the very heart of darkness. By the adjectives that Conrad gives to Europe, he is creating the identity of a colonizer that is right, while the adjectives that he gives to Africa are all negative introducing a sort of devilish identity.

This identity is also evident in the actions and the behaviors of the characters. Conrad depicts British domination and imperialistic power in the gullible character of Marlow. He is so happy to observe the incomprehensible measure of red (symbol of British region) on the map. He is happy because he thinks that the reality and the ideal place are there signifying the true salvation, religion, society and business. The truth of the colonialism is depicted by Conrad in the character of Manager (whom Marlow glorifies). He is a District Manager who is a real and radical follower of imperialism, exploiting his position and taking his best advantage from each state he is in. Based on the description of the Manager from the view of Marlow, it is clear that he considers the Manager as someone who is in the quest of bringing the civilization, humanity, and true identity to the Africans who are savage, uncivilized and non-human. On the whole, Conrad in his novella, *Heart of Darkness*, wanted to create a kind of ideological procedure in which European people believe that they are doing the suitable action regarding the act of colonization and on the other hand, African people believe that they must change their identity to the European one. These are all the after-effects of colonialism on the identity of people. As a contemporary concept, post-colonialism or the so-called colonial studies is a notion which has been under the consideration of many critics, authors and literary scholars. Undoubtedly, if one wants to clarify such a concept, he should consider the notions and thoughts of the critics like Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak and Achebe. Post-colonialism refers to the study of behaviour, actions, thoughts, political and social tendencies of the people who are under the authority of colonizing countries, especially after the age of colonization. In post-colonial studies, a reader not only deals with such mentioned concepts, but also pays attention to the influence of this force—enforced by the colonizer—on the identity of the colonized people. Actually, post-colonialism deals with what the people of the colonized countries become after colonization and to speak meticulously, what the colonizers wanted to achieve through the act of



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colonization. As many other discourses, through the history literature paid one of its most important attentions to show and reveal such mentioned post-colonial characteristics and influences as well. Thus, an actual reader of literature can comprehend the fact that some authors are to be considered as defenders of colonizer countries while some others are on the opposite side and are the defenders of the colonized countries. The first group are called the agents of imperialism while the second group are the defendant of the colonized people. To mention the name,

4. **CONCLUSION**

Joseph Conrad, a Polish writer, in his novella *Heart of Darkness*, narrates the story of a voyage that begins from London and ends in London. The novella portrays a very beautiful, civilized, human and logical picture of Europe in contrast with a very nasty, uncivilized, illogical and savage picture of Africa. In this novella, Conrad wants to note that the colonizers are doing the proper action regarding the colonization of African countries and the colonized people must be colonized. There are many clues in the novella which alludes the after-effects of colonialism among which the concept of identity for a post-colonial man is the most important one. Therefore, using the ideas of critics such as Said, Fanon, Spivak, and Achebe, one could say that there are many traces of post-colonialism and the negative effects of colonialism after the age of colonization regarding the identity of people, the behavior of people and the changed definition and meaning of culture and society.

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