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Politics and Ethics of Postcolonial Studies-A case for Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

This paper examines the politics and ethics of postcolonial studies through a critical reading of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. It explores how the novella simultaneously reveals and reproduces imperial ideologies, positioning Africa as a space of alterity while exposing the moral decay of European colonialism. Drawing on postcolonial theorists such as Achebe and Said, the study interrogates the ethical implications of interpreting Conrad's text within contemporary discourse. It argues that Heart of Darkness remains a crucial yet problematic site for understanding the power dynamics, representational politics, and ongoing challenges that shape postcolonial critique.

Key Words: Post-colonial; Politics; Ethics; Epistemological; Impenetrable; Benevolence; Utilitarianism; Egotism; Abominable; Intended; Hedonism.

Most and perhaps all postcolonial theories, existing and to come perforce deal with politics, represent as they do, variously and cumulatively, the colonized as darkness visible, differing a shade less or more. That is why it sounds blasphemous to discuss postcolonial literature without recourse to one or all postcolonial theories in a sweep. Politics, however, is a practical science as Aristotle said, but so is ethics. When we study a novel like the Heart of Darkness, it would seem desirable to determine the mutual relation of politics and ethics. While the aim of ethics is to determine what ought to be done by individuals, politics aims at determining what the government and in the present context the colonial society ought to do as to control the colonized.

At first sight it may seem that politics so-conceived, must be a branch of ethics. For all the actions of the government, whatever its forms are actions of individuals, alone and in combination and so are all actions of those who are obeying, influencing or perhaps occasionally resisting, form the axis of domination and resistance, as Said stipulated in his contrapuntal reading in Culture and Imperialism. Thus politics and ethics are not unlikely to blend, and indeed politics in the ethical society vanishes altogether.

It is while keeping this epistemological shift from politics to ethics in mind that an attempt is made here to study Heart of Darkness. Unfortunately, most of the readings of the novel are overtly political. In fact, the two most important studies on the novel are of Chinua Achebe and of Ian Watt. Achebe's attack on Conrad is perhaps the severest. His central point is that the novel projects the image of Africa as "the otherworld" the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization. Himself a creative artist, did not Achebe himself depict this bias on the part of the West in Things Fall Apart?

It is quite common for a western be racist when he forays, as Marlow does, into Africa. But why equate Marlow with Conrad? Achebe did not agree with those who read the novel as a site for disintegration of the European mind, represented by Kurtz, nor does he subscribe to the view that Conrad ridicules Europe's civilizing mission in Africa. Both contention that Conrad is racist and that the novel showcases the disintegration of the European mind in Kurtz or that it is critique of Europe's civilizing mission, are oft the point.

The problem Conrad poses is not political, but ethical. Conrad himself has hinted in his comments on "To Make You See", an extract from the Preface of the Niggar of Narcissus.

Art is long and life is short and success is very far off. And thus, doubtful of strength to travel so far, we talk a little about the aim in the aim of art, which like life itself, is inspiring, difficult — observed by most… it is not less great, but only more difficult.

The aim of Kurtz was not amiss in ethical significance, what Achebe dubs as racist. Nor does Conrad question European civilizing mission, leaving aside its failure to remain steady in the pursuit of it. We first learn about Kurtz through Marlow – that he is the chief of the Inner Station – a prodigy- "an emissary of pity and carcass of some big river animal", an angel or a feign. This contradictory image of Kurtz struck Marlow as an absurd dream. Marlow wanted to see whether this man, "who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about work when there." It was not the point with Marlow before

meeting Kurtz that the fellow had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together, but that despite his being a gifted creator, especially his missionary zeal – the gift of expression, he degenerated – and ended in becoming the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light and that deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness.

Throughout the narrative Conrad juxtaposes the two aspects as if they were part of the whole human race, including Kurtz- like the two hulks with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites and temperature normal. It is this difficulty of reconciling the aim of art with life Conrad spoke of in the remarks quoted above. The difficulty of reconciling ethics of duty with which Kurtz came to Congo with the ethics of egoistic hedonism, the theory that one ought to seek his own pleasure. The latter is one of natural methods of ethics. However, its primary disadvantage is the difficulty of measuring and evaluating pleasure.

Conrad looks at Kurtz's phenomenon with dismay, even horror, that such a gifted man was lost in seeking his self-interest. The novelist does not wish to deal with either utilitarianism or hedonism piece-meal. Thus, instead of championing one method he sought to find a higher unity in which the distribution of each of the other is preserved. The strength of the novel lies in the sympathetic treatment while, at the same time, testing the claims of each approach. The original Kurtz, Marlow says, was educated in England and as he was good enough to tell him–his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English and his father was half-French. Thus, according to synthetic Conradian view of life, all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz. Marlow learnt that the international society for suppression of savage customs had entrusted him with the making of a report for its future guidance. And he had written it, too. Marlow had seen the report – seventeen pages of close writing. But this was before his, Marlow stops short of what. All that he could say was that Kurtz's nerves went wrong and caused him to preside at certain midnight lanes– involving savage customs ending, of course, with unspeakable rites. What happened to him that while glorifying the naturalness of Africans that he wished to exterminate brutes.

We have not to look for this change neither in the Western racism nor in the darkness of Africa. It lies in Kurtz and more importantly in the utilitarian mission he followed. The genesis of this change lies, Marlow also says, in Kurtz not being common. However, the mission he took over is not metaphysical. It is a common experience that many of us, like Lord Jim and Nostromo in Conrad are charged by own passion to cater to human happiness. Kurtz wrote in the end of his report, that "By the simple exercise of the will we can exert a power for good practices, unbounded…" Marlow on reading it felt that Kurtz not only himself soared, but also took him (Marlow) with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember. All the same it

gave Marlow, “the notion of exotic immensity rules by an august Benevolence.” It made the narrator tingle with enthusiasm. This was, as Marlow further says, the – tour of eloquence – of words – of burning noble words.

The word Benevolence is written in capital because it is generally believed that it is a supreme virtue, comprehending and summing up all other virtues. The widely supported claim to supremacy seems an adequate reason for Conrad’s giving benevolence at the first place after platonic wisdom. The general maxim of benevolence would be commonly said to be that we ought to love all our fellowmen or all our fellow creatures. Kant prescribed duty of benevolence. But as Conrad finds Kantian duty is deficient in emotive element, Kurtz sought to involve the emotion in benevolence in order to promote not only happiness but also cultivate virtue in blacks in Africa. That is why Conrad emphasizes, of course, through Marlow, how far it is good to foster and encourage this emotion. The emotional impulse tends to make the action, as it happened in the case of Kurtz, of relieving distress need not only easier to the agent. It is generally recognized that mistaken pity is more likely to mislead us astray than mistaken gratitude.

Conrad seems to ask whether it is not our duty to refrain from all superfluous indulgences, so as to be exact in our duty. Justice rather than benevolence should be the rule of relieving distress. Indeed, the dying Kurtz asks for justice. He wanted justice. How too his concern has been ethical. He wanted to judge rules which ought to govern the private conduct of an individual. The manager blames Kurtz for his wrong method and the method of benevolence charged with emotional impulse. The manager is right in saying that Kurtz lacked restraint; there was something wanting in him – some small matter, which when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether Kurtz knew of this deficiency himself, the manager could not say, but observed that the knowledge of this deficiency lay in the method of ethics came to him at last.

The manager continued his observation. He said that though the knowledge of his deficiency came to Kurtz late when he cried “horror! Horror! The wilderness had found him early and whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception. This is not to say that Kurtz did not speak of love, justice, charity, benevolence, but he did not know that utilitarianism requires a man to sacrifice not only his private happiness but also that of person whose interest natural sympathy makes for dearer to him than his own well-being, if demands are sterner and more rigid than the traditional notions of duty and virtue. His company’s vision is that his method was wrong. He was sent to make a report of the savage rites, but he not only participated in those rites, but also satisfied his egoistic hunger to amass for himself. Indeed, he assumed supremacy over the Congo tribes. He desired to have Kings meet him at railway stations on his return from ghastly nowhere, when

he intended to accomplish great things. He told Marlow: "you show them you have in you something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to recognition of your ability", adding, "of course, you must take care of the motives – right motives, always."

This egoism obviously betrayed his company's purpose. That is why the manager of the company was apathetic and even hostile towards Kurtz's motives. Kurtz knew this. He called the manager "This noxious fool", and added that he "is capable of prying into my boxes when I am not looking…" Kurtz died after uttering 'horror' twice. It is followed by Kurtz's inquisition by Marlow, who becomes the custodian of Kurtz's paper. It was not an easy task for Marlow to judge Kurtz particularly in the sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism surrendering the place – the conflict between the duty and self-interest. And in case the conflict remains unresolved, the door of universal skepticism opens, as it did in the case of Kurtz. However, Conrad's purpose in showing this breach open wide is to reconcile duty with self-love. Theologists have resolved the problem by the doctrine of immortality and eternal reward. But Conrad refuses the solution in the interest of preserving the autonomy of morals. He finds that neither duty nor self-love can be rationalized. Why one takes on oneself the onus of heroics is non-rational, equally as there is no reason for us to take the other extreme of love-love. For Marlow, Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. Since Marlow has peeped over the edges of Kurtz's despair, he could understand his hero better than the representative of the company. The company would judge him in his failure to perform his duty. That is simple enough, but Marlow could understand the meaning of Kurtz's stare that could not see the flame of the candle, symbolically the clear light of the reason that duty was for him a categorical imperative. On the other hand, Kurtz's star was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, which he summed up in the twice-uttered "horror".

For Marlow, the expression of horror on the part of Kurtz was some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction. But all went away. As Marlow attests, "The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by the shadowy images now images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously around his undistinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression." (HOD 116). His heart became a battle ground for utilitarianism and egoism. He still longed to be faithful to his Intended, his station, his career, his ideas and these were the subject for, as Marlow says, his occasional utterances of elevated sentiments. The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham, whose fate was to be buried presently, to quote Marlow, in the mould of primeval earth. Rightly then:

Bur both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power (HOD-116)

Kurtz's cry of horror, according to Marlow, was a moral victory, paid for by innumerable defeats by abominable terrors and satisfactions. But it was a victory notwithstanding. He was able to say that he himself was horrified by the defeats of his benevolence. That is why, Marlow says, he remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, i.e. beyond Kurtz's death, particularly his meeting with Kurtz's Intended. She was in mourning even after a year of Kurtz's death. She still lived by his ideal. Marlow would not break her image, even at the cost of lying. What shocked Kurtz in was the slimy of ivory which he claimed his. The company, he said, did not pay for it. He collected it himself at his personal risk. This amounted to admitting that rational ethic is an illusion. It would, as Henry Sidgwick says, be irrational for one to sacrifice one's own happiness and "therefore a harmony between the maxim of prudence and the maxim of Rational Benevolence must be somehow demonstrated if morality is to be made completely rational." (MOE: 498)

Conrad seems to hold this common sense vital. But utilitarianism, according to Sidgwick, is more rigid in exacting sacrifice on the part of the agent than common sense. It is in this regard that Kurtz's private interest came in clash with the ideal of self-sacrifice. It would, to reiterate, not mean abandoning morality altogether; but it would seem necessary to abandon the idea of rationalizing it completely (MOE 508). And this, in turn, would have the practical consequence that in a conflict between duty and self interest, the conflict would be decided as Conrad did, by the preponderance of self interest over benevolence. So justice should be done to Kurtz. He asked for it, but Marlow could not, for all his impartiality.

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