

**RHETORIC OF IMPERIALISM IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S  
*HEART OF DARKNESS***

**Sukanya Kashyap**  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Gauhati University,  
Guwahati

**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to depict the oppression and exploitation of the colonised lands and the natives through the medium of language. Language is used as a device by the imperialists to manipulate and subjugate the natives for colonial expansion and promotion of Western civilization. The paper, by using the novella *Heart Of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, illustrates how the condition of imperialism causes the creation of a rhetoric of the imperialists that ingeniously portrays the natives- their “Other” as barbaric or non-human like in their existence. In this study I have tried to show Conrad’s representation of the politics of rhetoric in an imperial situation. Conrad ‘s narrative performs a dual function; firstly it reveals the way language is manipulated for further exploitation of the natives and their resources, and secondly it precariously exposes the hypocrisies of the imperialists in the way they distinguish between what is civilized and what is barbaric.

**Keywords:** Marlow, Language, Conrad.

The word rhetoric refers to the skill of elegant and persuasive speaking. The term has also been defined in the Oxford English Dictionary more precisely as ‘the art of using language so as to persuade or influence others.’ In *Language, Society and Power: An Introduction*, it has been stated that certain linguistic structures and devices such as metaphors, euphemisms, etc are used to increase the impact of the ideas of those in the position of power. This is applicable in the case of a colonised country wherein language is manipulated by the colonizers to establish that the colonial hegemony over the natives is necessary for the latter. Politics is undeniably connected to power, and the attainment of power as well as the implementation of one’s political beliefs is possible through various ways. Imposition by the use of physical force is one of these ways, but then the most effective way of persuading people to believe in your ideology is through language. The Europeans also succeeded in its imperialistic ventures by the creation of a rhetoric that espoused the claims of civilizing mission.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart Of Darkness* is a novella that achieves the complexity of a great work of art. It was composed initially in a serialized form in 1899 for Blackwood’s Magazine,

and later in the year 1902 it was published in the form of a book along with Conrad's other short stories. *Heart of Darkness* traces the subjective experiences of the narrator Marlow in Africa. Marlow travelled to Africa to join a cargo boat but is repulsed by the exploitation of the natives at the hands of greedy ivory traders. He undertakes an arduous journey through the country in an attempt to meet Mr. Kurtz who is considered a respectable educated and civilized man. But what he witnesses there is the dark brutality of Kurtz who achieves unrestrained power over the natives by the use of his gun and knowledge. As such the implications of this novella are individual, social, political as well as metaphysical in nature, and one of the subject matters that prominently gets represented in the text is the issue of imperialism. This finds projection at the very outset through the narration of Marlow whose language confirms the politics at work in the subversion of the customs, landscape and the description of the natives. Marlow speaks to his companions aboard the *Nellie* about "all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin" (Conrad, 105) of the Elizabethan times, who sailed from the light of England into the darkness of unknown seas, hoping to find new lands and conquering them. Marlow as the narrator is however aware that even England was once "one of the dark places of the Earth" (105) whose "utter savagery" was felt by the imperialist Romans. Through this assertion, the narrative emphasizes that modern imperialism is hardly different from its ancient form:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much. (Conrad, 107)

In the structures of power established by an imperial power to subjugate a country, language plays a pertinent role. The language of those in a position of power could successfully subvert and represent the culture of the oppressed in a negative light. As the lives of the natives involves in a "deviation from the ideal" (Spivak), they are subjected to misrepresentation. The norms of the European world are considered as the ideal by the colonizers and as such the multiple differences- linguistic, cultural and social are seen as a threat and a cause of chaos by the colonizers. In the very beginning of the novella, Marlow describes the sense of alienation and disorientation felt by the Europeans in a land that doesn't adhere to their ideas of a civilized habitat. When Marlow and his white companions come across a group of black natives, he describes that there is "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 droop of heavy and motionless foliage" (Conrad, 139). Marlow sharing the prejudiced viewpoints of his fellow Europeans considered himself a "sane" man encountering "an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse." It is the usage of such portrayals in the narrative of *Heart Of Darkness* that made Chinua Achebe accuses Joseph Conrad of being a racist. In this context, Achebe stated in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*" that Africa has been represented "as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations", a place which is "remote and vaguely familiar." But keeping in mind the twentieth century theories of narrative criticism wherein the author and the work has sharp and distinguished boundaries, it could be possible that Conrad's narrative addresses and exposes the intentions behind the imperialist's thoughts as he finds himself in a completely alien environment. Critics such as Terry Eagleton, Michael Valdez and others have pointed out that Conrad's narrative reveals the imperialists' inability to express themselves clearly in their own language when they are placed in a landscape and culture which is different from their own. Further this linguistic inadequacy and alienation to some extent becomes responsible for the exploitation and violence inflicted upon the natives. Frances

B.Singh has made a significant observation regarding the narrator Marlow. In his essay, Singh asserts that Marlow's perspectives on colonialism are depicted in three distinctive ways. First, he seems to attack colonialism directly as exemplified by his comments on the colonialization of ancient Britain by Romans. Second, he ironically questions the "noble cause" of the Europeans in Africa as he along with his companions witnesses the atrocities meted out on the natives. And third, Marlow makes use of metaphors that has been erstwhile used by his European predecessors to denigrate the natives.

Joseph Conrad has vividly captured the abstract and vague expressions of the uncertain speaker as he finds himself in an unknown land and in the midst of a culture radically different from his own. Such descriptions have been posited within the narrative. For instance, Marlow's describes how the journey in the river seemed to hark back to the earliest beginnings of the world and it possessed "a great silence, an impenetrable forest" (Conrad, 136) while the "great wall of vegetation...was...ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (132). There has also been a proliferating use of adjectives, an intentional suppression of grammatically necessary parts of speech and use of ellipsis in the descriptions. These stylistic devices and subtle fragmentations in language depict the crisis of language experienced by the Western imperialists in an alien environment. They suggest the immense pressure placed upon Marlow's linguistic capacities. He could not adequately represent the accurate objective details of his immediate environment or relate the subjective experiences of his imperial encounter with colonial Africa. As such, he remains unsure what "the roll of drums" at night could mean; "Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell" (138). In the process, he becomes a "linguistic exile, suddenly cut off from European languages, like the Russian sailor who does not understand the dialect of Kurtz's tribe" (Begam, 55). The crucial conversations that he heard utterly lacked in meaning: "They [the tribesmen] shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language" (Conrad, 168). Thus the language of the "other" becomes merely sounds made by a non-human. Bestial and non-human allusions combine to create an image of darkness and ignorance that depicts the dark continent. In the narrative words such as "shapes", bundles of acute angles", "phantoms", and "shadows" have been used to describe the natives. Then again words suggesting bestial imagery: "creatures", "dog", "ants", "bees" are also used to refer to the natives. Conrad also makes use of the recurrent image of natives moving on "all fours" throughout the novella. The natives are on all-fours either to move towards the river to drink or to worship 'Kurtz', the very symbol of a white man becoming barbaric. The narrative evidently shows how language is used by the imperialists to represent the natives as a non-human, the "other". Significantly, Kurtz who is considered the worthy representative of imperialism, towards the end of the narrative is shown as "crawling on all-fours". It is Kurtz who is given responsibility by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to write a report for its future guidance. Kurtz's report is written in a convincing and eloquent way so as to show how the whites "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings" (Conrad, 155) and "by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded" (155). The exploitative intentions and objectives of the imperialists that are hidden beneath the eloquent style of language are however revealed by the terrifying last statement: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (155). Marlow was aware that the report with its "unbounded power of eloquence- of words- of burning noble words" was a dangerous one which could aggravate imperialism, considering its potential use by Kurtz's successors in Congo. It is interesting to note that Marlow plays a vital role in understanding "the link" between

“systematic imperial violence and exploitation” and the manipulation and corruption of language in the colonial milieu. In the first section of the novella, Marlow on his way to the Central Station comes across a ‘man-of-war’ anchored near the coast. The man-of-war starts firing blankly into the forest. The firing kills a native hiding behind the bush. For Marlow, the whole episode seemed to have a “touch of insanity” especially because the frightened natives were “enemies”. The underlying implication in this incident is that the French imperialists who encroached upon the natives’ land are more likely to be the enemies of the latter.

A pertinent issue that is presented in the novella is that of homogenising the natives into groups and of renaming the places. Linda Thomas asserted in her text that the attribution of names and the way names and words are used is central to the process of constructing identities. Sociolinguists such as Thomas and R.A.Hudson have asserted that language plays a significant role in the formation of power structures and ideas. However, in Congo there is already the local names for places: “Gran’ Bassam”, “Little Popo”, and the communities of Africans are also mentioned: “Zanzibaris”, “Bangalas”, etc. In her paper Pre-empting Postcolonial Critique: Europeans in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Inga Clendinnen remarks;

The imperious magic of renaming( New Spain, New England, New Holland) would not work on Africa. It had too long and potent a role in the European imagination to be easily tamed.

As such the Africans are structured by the European masters for administrative control cognitively and politically, by the application of convenient labels. Further the geographical territories are managed by categorically dividing them into the “Outer Station”, the “Central Station”, and the “Inner Station”. And the natives are named “savages”, “workers”, “enemies”, “criminals” depending on the whims of the imperial masters. This structure of labelling in turn helps in justifying the subjugation of the natives by the imperialists as a civilizing process. In the third section of the novella, Marlow is described as having reached the Inner Station, the realm of Kurtz, where he fails to understand why the latter had hung human heads around the building. The Russian explains to him that those heads were of natives who had rebelled against Kurtz. Marlow sarcastically comments, “Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers- and these were rebels.”(Conrad, 165) Unlike the way Achebe’s criticism directs towards the language suggesting racial biasness, instances of this kind within the narrative shows Conrad’s understanding that words have the power to distort social reality. And in the case of a colonial and imperial regime, language is more likely to be used for the benefit of the imperialists. As such, the narrator seems to be mocking the hyperbolic use of language by imperialists to portray the natives as mere savages. Sentences such as;

“A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears.”(Conrad, 143)

And

“The tumultuous and mournful uproar of the natives culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking...”(143)

is used to justify their actions in the colonies. The so called civilizing mission of the European imperialists is interrogated by the author. Kurtz’s brutality towards the natives and his report on the locals of Africa reveals how language is manipulated to impose authority the

natives. Consequently it reflects the hollow ideals behind the civilizing mission and of the structures created by imperialism. As Frances B. Singh writes in his essay that “those who deny the principles of civilization in themselves and those who use those principles to destroy the lives of others both possess heart of darkness.”

### **Workcited**

- Achebe, Chinua. “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” Massachusetts Review 18. 1977. PDF file.
- Begam, Richard and Michael V. Moses, eds. *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature 1899- 1939*. London: Duke University Press, 2007. Print.
- Inga Clendinnen. “Preempting Postcolonial Critique: Europeans in the *Heart of Darkness*.” *Common Knowledge*. 13.1 (2007): 1-17. *ProjectMUSE*. Web. 23 June 2014.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*. 1990. Oxford: OUP, 2007. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Print.
- Singh, Frances B. “The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*.” *Conradiana*, 10(1978). PDF file.
- Thomas, Linda, et al. *Language, Society and Power: An Introduction*. 1999. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.