

The Analysis of *Heart of Darkness* : From Imperialist Point of View

Heart of Darkness is written by Joseph Conrad who is a Polish mariner. His novel is published in 1899. *Heart of Darkness* is based on Conrad's own journey to Belgian Congo. Besides, he remains in the British Merchant Navy for years, then he decided to write stories by inspiring on his own experiences. "Conrad wrote stories and novels, many with a nautical setting, that depict trials of the human spirit in the midst of what he saw as an impassive, inscrutable universe"(166).Also, "Conrad is considered an early modernist though his works contain elements of 19th-century realism"(Robson 93). Besides,*Heart of Darkness* brings of light to African Congo from the author's point of view.The novel is set on a jungle in Africa and Congo River. However, the travelling of Marlow through the Congo River is more than a journey, it is also an immense view on Imperialism. "According to the Encyclopedica Britannica, the Congo is outside the 'all nations' regime; its 'state' needs to be defined, and, thus, its natives need to be 'civilized' so that European trade can thrive" (Hendon 7). Europeans comes to Africa to build a civilized society (in their opinon) in primitive Africa. Europeans thought that the natives of Congo are so primitive that they can easily be shaped by them. According to G.P. Gooch who is European as well in *The Heart of the Empire (1901)* "Neo-Imperialism" showed that "when men are far from civilized society and can do what they like, they tend to their worst rather than their best" (Raskin 128).

The subject matter of alternation of civilization from primitivity has discussed by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. So, it is important to comprehend what white men can do in *Heart of Darkness* from the point of Conrad. Conrad always believed that the Native people of Congo needed to be civilized. The image of the primitive Natives of Congo has been formed by the white people of Europe. As Ford Madox Ford's foretelling about the fate of Conrad's novel,

ياسمين همت مدرس زبان و ادبيات انگلیسی

تدریس دروس تخصصی ادبیات انگلیسی

09190226928

emphasize, it gained when it was written a certain vividness from its fierce lashings at the

speakable crew that exploited the natives in the Congo” (Ford 82). Even though Conrad’s novel is seen as an exploitation of the Natives according to some critiques, Conrad depicts the Congo as a place of heart of imperialism. As Raskin states, “Conrad stayed in a border country which linked the primitive African world with the modern European in the Congo” (116). Considering the primitive and modern people, there must be either disorder or reconciliation between them in the Congo. The purpose of Conrad is to demonstrate the reconciliation between modern European and primitive people that occurred with the power of imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*.

Marlow’s western mind can be interpreted in Conrad’s descriptions. From the perspective of Birgit Maier-Katkin, “Marlow is located entirely within the commodious and efficient boundaries of Western civilization” (585). Evaluating this comment about Conrad’s novel, the readers notice that Conrad places Marlow as a whiteman to the centre of civilization in the African Congo. One of the basic reasons of such a way that Conrad’s follow is that he supported the authority which will be built on the African Natives by the Europeans. In addition, while Marlow is telling the story of his decision to sailing through Congo, he says “and as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird- a silly little bird ... the snake had charmed me” (12). Here, Conrad implicates that the snake represents the Congo River with its curving. Then, Marlow adds “and the river was there-fascinating-deadly like snake” (15). Conrad shows the enchanting aspects of Congo. The Congo becomes a charming snake with its primitiveness.

Imperialism begins with the coming of Europeans to African Congo with the aim of bringing civilization during the reign of the Belgian King Leopold. Arriving of modern Europeans to the primitive Africa starts the Imperialism in the Heart of Darkness. Based on

ياسمين همت مدرس زبان و ادبيات انگلیسی

تدریس دروس تخصصی ادبیات انگلیسی

09190226928

this, Beatrice Webb specifies that "Imperialism is in the air!" (284). So, imperialism is the

most remarkable topic of the *Heart of Darkness*. This essay examines how Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* supports the idea of imperialism in terms of benefits of colonialism, slavery and building a civilization.

First, Conrad's support of imperialism can be seen in his positive treatment of colonialism. In the late 1800s, Europeans began to explore the undeveloped countries in Africa and colonisation in there. To establish a dominance in the Congo is the principal cause why the Europeans come to Africa. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad investigates the nature of colonialism. For this reason, he emphasizes the importance of colonisation for nations. It is articulated that Conrad focuses on what the Company utters to the community : "they are going to Congo to civilize the Natives. Conrad drew an accurate picture of the white men and the natives of Congo during the colonialism" ("Critical Study about the Colonialism in "Heart of Darkness"). As is stated in this quotation, the process of the colonialism of Congo is conveyed with combining of both Conrad's own experiences and imagination. As Alberto Moravia claims that Conrad defined the "old colonialism" in its "picturesqueness" (114). The term of "picturesqueness" of colonialism is portrayed with; "A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants" (21) in *Heart of Darkness*. The representation of Natives to ants shows that in the eyes of Europeans they were just a little ants. Besides, it shows that how Conrad think and reflect the African primitive people. Marlow's these words are the proof of how far the colonisation has progressed. As Jonah Raskin emphasized in his article that "from his Congo experience Conrad also came to believe that it was his task to unmask society, to look below its surface to discern its essential character" (120). The word "unmask" can be interpreted from different perspectives; when it is examined with the images of imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad unearth's the unseen sides of imperialism by using colonialism.

Economy is always the head of everything for the nations such as Kennedy emphasizes that “economic growth without social progress lets the great majority of people remain in poverty, while a privileged few reap the benefits of rising abundance” so it was not wrong to take economical advantages from the sources of undeveloped countries for Conrad. Marlow says that “The word “ivory” rang in the air, was whispered was sighed. You would think they were praying to it” (33). The ivory is the most critical element of the colonialism in Congo. It is seen as white, shiny yet death matter. Shah Obaidul Mustafa explains the ivory as symbol of colonialism in his article named “Critical Study about the Colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*”.

Ivory was the lucrative trade which was found by the Belgian trading company when Belgian King Leopold II governed the Congo. It was useless to natives but the worthy to the white-men because of its usage in ornament manufacturing. Thus, the motive of white-men was to indulge in the exploitation and brutality extract the ivory from the native people (n.pag).

In the case of ivory trade in Congo, the selling of the ivory is seen as a profitable business for the Europeans, the ivory is sold for the making of the piano keyboard. Additionally, Conrad backs up the trade of ivory because it is essential in terms of economically for white-men. Marlow tells us that “Mr Kurtz was at the present in charge of trading post, a very important one, in the true ivory-country”(27). Kurtz is the king of ivory and the ruler of colonies in Congo as a European. Raskin remarks upon Kurtz by saying that “Conrad created Kurtz to symbolize the fundamental conflicts and the decadence of colonialism”(124). However, it seems that there is a rising of colonialism contrary to collapse. With the aim of establishing a civilization in Congo, the dominance of Europeans gradually increase. Europeans control the

ياسمين همت مدرس زبان و ادبيات انگلیسی

تدریس دروس تخصصی ادبیات انگلیسی

09190226928

PDF Compressor Free Version
ivory trade and primitive people of Congo. For this reason, colonialism in Congo is portrayed as a mean of trade or economic profit in *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad.

“The development of colonialism in Africa that was a consequence of the explorations”(Fabrizio n.pag) reveals the slavery of Native people in Africa. The primitive and weak society of Congo is enslaved by the Europeans. According to Reinhard and Fabrizio, ‘The relationships between European nations and the other “not civilized” countries changed. In Europe there was a very important development of the industrial capitalism. Before then, the colonial expansion policy was a way to find new jobs for the European people and especially to defend and control the colonies for the resources they had (‘Slavery and Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*’). Therefore, slavery appeared in African Congo with the influence of capitalism, imperialism and colonialism.

The constitution of slavery in African Congo can be seen in Marlow’s observations through his experiences reflected by Conrad. Especially, the term “ivory” becomes the most essential element on the slavery for the Europeans. The ivory is the subject matter of both colonialism and slavery in Conrad’s novel. As Lenihan states, the imagery of slavery is intertwined with the depiction of the natural world and its destruction, for example the whips used on slaves (made from rhinoceros skin) would rip layers of skin from a man’s back, illustrative of imperialism stripping the Congo of its natural resources such as ivory and trees”(n.pag). It shows that the black people of the Africa work on the ivory trade. This trade is provided by the slaves of African Congo and as a leader of the ivory trade Kurtz is the head of slaves in the novel. Conrad shows Kurtz as a representative of all Europe. Again, Marlow states that “Mr. Kurtz is a very remarkable person”(27). One of the Kurtz’s most remarkable quality is mentioned “the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly”(92) by

ياسمين همت مدرس زبان و ادبيات انگلیسی

تدریس دروس تخصصی ادبیات انگلیسی

09190226928

PDF Compressor Free Version
Marlow. Marlow stresses that "there was nothing exactly profitable"(96) about the skulls

which the company agent Kurtz had placed in front of his house" (Ward 438). Unlike, Kurtz aims to found a civilized country in Africa as a European man by using black people of Congo. Furthermore, Europeans main goal is to create a civilized place in Africa. It can be associated with Rudyard Kipling's "white men's burden" idea as a European. Kipling implicates that it is European's mission to build a civilization in primitive Africa. In his novel, Conrad highlights his idea that while Europeans are founding a civilization, they can utilize the black people as slave. Likewise, the slaves of the Africa are ruled by European figure Kurtz and slavery has emerged to show that the concept of civilization is alive from the points of Europeans.

On the other hand, the slaves working on the railroad are presented as a image of the progressing of Africa by Conrad. In addition to this, Froude had claimed that "civilization spreads with railroad speed"(160). Reflecting the working people on railroad as a slave, Conrad aims to demonstrate that the purpose of slavery is civilization. In this respect, according to Raskin, "the building of the railroad is depicted as a struggle between the white man and nature"(123) and "Conrad tells us the black labourers:"brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were allowed to crawl away and rest" (124). His words shows the power of slavery in African Congo.

In *Heart of Darkness*, building of civilization in African Congo can be evaluated in terms of both economic and physical civilization from perspective of Conrad. Conrad sets up a controversy between civilized and uncivilized in *Heart of Darkness*. Moreover,

The civilized elevate certain principles as societal ideals such as equality of opportunity, justice and intellectualism. The civilized peoples of the earth often

try to impress their values onto the perceived “savages”. They justify their actions with a higher purpose, either in the name of God or in the name of progress for the good of mankind. Civilized man values the ideal of progress because moral progress separates the man from his primordial nature, effectively restraining the best within. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad criticizes the failure of civilized men to live up to the ideal of spreading moral progress through the changes within Kurtz and the distortion of moral progress to economic progress(“Economics: A Study of Consumption” n.pag).

It reveals that Conrad indicates the significance of economic civilization in African Congo such as, the Company, the stations for ivory trade, the ivory and the railroad are the representatives of economic civilization in *Heart of Darkness*. When Marlow come to the jungle of Congo, the Swede says him “There’s your Company’s station”(22) and he comes upon a “railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air”(22). The railway-truck is used as a symbol of civilization in jungle of Congo by Conrad. In addition, the contributions of economic developments to civilization have been observed by Marlow and transferred to the reader by Conrad.

Furthermore, the traces of cultural civilization in African Congo can be seen in the Marlow’s experiences. As Lushington states “Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are barely human. They appear as animated masks, theatrical props for the nightmare set, the location of the primitive”(47). It strengthens the idea that Europeans see Africa as primitive as its black peoples, then progressive movements begins and cultural interactions take place because the Europeans who come to bring civilization want to reflect their own cultures to African society such as the ivory is found in African countries but it is sold for European people for their decorative ornaments, so the ivory reflect the culture of Europe. In addition, the ivory

PDF Compressor Free Version
becomes important for the African people. In this respect, Marlow says that “The word ivory rang in the air... You would think they were praying to it”(33). In this condition, ivory refers to cultural image of both Europeans and Africans in *Heart of Darkness*.

Heart of Darkness represents “white men’s mission” through Marlow’s observation of white people’s imperialist ideology and cruel treatment of black people. According to Rudyard Kipling, it is white Europeans responsibility to teach black good manner and to “civilize” them, however; both Conrad and Kipling as a supporter of imperialism do not reflect the catastrophe of civilization in Africa. According to Halbwaschs, “Residing inside of Marlow’s civilization”(40). It shows that there is no beneficial side of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in terms of imperialism, colonialism and slavery. Additionally, it is emphasized that “Conrad focused less on the horror of Kurtz’s life and experience, that is to say, less on primitive darkness of the human soul, both the crimes against humanity and Marlow’s silent complicity with evil might have emerged as more central and more apparent”(Maier-Katkin 602).

Consequently, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most influential novel in English Literature that written with an imperialistic point of view. Conrad’s novel supports the idea of imperialism by reflecting the benefits of colonialism, slavery and civilization on Europeans. The idea of imperialism is supported and interpreted in many different ways in the novel by Conrad. The economic factors in colonialism and the significance of the ivory are emphasized by the author. The causes and consequences of colonisation is discussed, likewise; examples of enslavement are available in Conrad’s novel and it is supported by Conrad.

The mission of the Europeans that building a civilized country in primitive Africa is the most essential part of the *Heart of Darkness* because the mission is seen as an important responsibility by the Europeans. As Brown states “Heart of Darkness has commonly been seen to present a subversive perspective through Marlow’s perversion of West’s image of itself as

ياسمين همت مدرس زبان و ادبيات انگليسي

تدريس دروس تخصصي ادبيات انگليسي

09190226928

the place of light and civilization" (15). The building a civilization in African Congo is

observed in terms of economical and cultural aspects. Briefly, Heart of Darkness is a

representative of the soul of both imperialism and Europeans as Conrad.

Works Cited

ياسمين همت مدرس زبان و ادبيات انگلیسی

تدریس دروس تخصصی ادبیات انگلیسی

09190226928

Brown, Tony C. "Cultural Psychosis on the Frontier: The Work of the Darkness in Joseph

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2000, pp. 14–28. Jstor,

www.jstor.org/stable/29533369.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Penguin, 1994.

Fabrizio and Reinhard. "Slavery and Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*", www.itiscannizzaro.net/Ianni/booksweb/sitodarkness/papers/fabrizioanna.htm. Accessed 21

May 2018.

May 2018.

Gracedrift. "Economics: A Study of Consumption". 27 Nov, 2010,

[essayforum.com/books/heart-darkness-economics-study-consumption-](http://essayforum.com/books/heart-darkness-economics-study-consumption-22539/)

[22539/](http://essayforum.com/books/heart-darkness-economics-study-consumption-22539/). Accessed 6 June 2018.

Halbwachs, Maurice. "On Collective Memory." *Heritage of Sociology*, University of Chicago

Press, 1992, pp.40.

Jeffrey Meyers, Joseph Conrad: A Biography, 1991, p. 166.

Lenihan, James. "A Thought on Imperialism and Slavery in *Heart of Darkness*."

Oct.2012, [jameslenihan89.wordpress.com/2012/10/29/a-thought-of-imperialism-and-](http://jameslenihan89.wordpress.com/2012/10/29/a-thought-of-imperialism-and-slavery-in-heart-of-darkness)

[slavery-in-heart-of-darkness](http://jameslenihan89.wordpress.com/2012/10/29/a-thought-of-imperialism-and-slavery-in-heart-of-darkness). Accessed 6 June 2018.

Lushington, Mark. "*Heart of Darkness* and Cultural Nationalism". *Contributions in Black*

Studies: Vol.4, Article 6, 2008.

Maier-Katkin, Birgit, and Daniel Maier-Katkin. "At the Heart of Darkness: Crimes against

Humanity and Banality of Evil." *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol.26, no.3, 2004, pp.584-604. Jstor

ياسمين همت مدرس زبان و ادبيات انگليسي

تدريس دروس تخصصي ادبيات انگليسي

09190226928

Mustafa, Shah Obaatul. "Critical Study about the Colonialism in Heart of Darkness."

Feb.2018,owlcation.com/humanities/Critical-Study-about-the-Colonialism-in-Heart-of-

Darkness.Accessed 21 May 2018.

Raskin, Jonah. "Imperialism: Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *Journal of Contemporary History*,

vol.2, no.2, 1967, pp.113-131. Jstor

Ward, Tony. "State Crime in the Heart of Darkness." *The British Journal of Criminology*, vol.

45, no. 4, 2005, pp. 434-445. Jstor