

“ It's Queer How Out Of Touch With Truth Women Are” : A Feminist Study of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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Abstract: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) has been (un)arguably one of the most debated novellas portraying a diagnosis of human nature, intricate relationships and socio-political order. So far much of the debate and discussions on the work have primarily been on power conflicts, social order and portrayal of the native land and people under colonial regime. Little attention, however, has been paid to the novella's depiction of female characters. Conrad (1857-1924) presents women as weak, dependent, naive and idealistic who believe in fantasy. All the female characters are shown powerless; if they have power by chance that is possible only because of the connection with a powerful man. Despite socio-cultural differences in so called civilized or uncivilized societies, patriarchal influence is everywhere in different forms. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts a feminist reading of the work to find out how it portrays women in terms of defining identity, individuality and freedom. The paper chiefly through a feminist study tends to scrutinize traditional patriarchal attitude found in the work.

Key Words: Human nature, power conflicts, female characters, patriarchal attitude.

Date of Submission: 26-07-2019

Date of Acceptance: 12-08-2019

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the literary work of late nineteenth century when European colonizers were competing with each other for spreading their wings throughout Africa in order to gain its resources. When we look at the role of the greedy men and weak women in this novella, it becomes apparent that these men and women represent parts of the European societies that were in the dark about the brutalities of colonialism. Again through the protagonist of the novella, Conrad depicts an ancient man who believes that patriarchy is the natural order of society. In a general sense, it is the story about exercising powers upon the weak, ignorant and naive people by the strong, advantageous and tricky people. The black men and women, even the white women are the victims of white men with black souls. The so called civilized white people generate the systems of a society to discriminate and oppress the weak creating an illusion before them. But when these weak people adjust to their weaknesses and start living in fantasy, the society and rules maker never claim their responsibility for it, rather it becomes the nature or fate of the weak. Thus the weak are becoming weaker and the strong are becoming stronger day by day. In the late nineteenth century, voice was raised against all unjust rules of the so called strong and a revolutionary change in the society became inevitable. Like many of the advantageous men, Joseph Conrad did not join the stream, and kept the patriarchal system alive in his literary works. Exploration of patriarchal mindset, misinterpretation and discrimination is the key focus of the paper that studies *Heart of Darkness* through the lens of feminism.

From the very beginning of the human history, society has always been patriarchal minus some glaring exceptions. We cannot pin down the origin of patriarchy as there are many constant debates concerning this topic. Patriarchy is considered the natural phenomena of society as men possess advantageous physical strength. In ancient age when warfare arose, tribes were able to triumph over others for more property and it was beneficial for women to ally themselves with men to achieve protection for themselves and their children. Therefore, patriarchy was perhaps a natural and appropriate solution in a war-torn period. Almost absolute male dominance spanned for thousands of years with empires built and fallen such as the Roman Empire, Egyptian Empire and Umayyad Empire etc., not to point out continuous conquests and struggles during long periods such as the Dark Ages. There were also the rare cases of female leaders such as Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria of England, Queen Isabella of Spain, Cleopatra of Egypt, and Empress Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi of China. (Man & Woman)

However, these were not the signs of female superiority nor were these periods' turning points which had changed the relationship between the two sexes. Impact of the industrial revolution on the relationship

between the two sexes has been indirect yet significant since with the invention of the steam engine the way of surpassing physical strength of the individual has been invented through intellect, efficiency and productivity. Men's age-old advantage of physical strength has begun to lessen with the commencement of industrialization. Then the idea of feminism arises to bring about changes in the discriminating society.

According to Pramod K. Nayar, “ Feminism is both a political stance and a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of analysis when reading cultural practices and as a platform to demand equality, rights and justice” (83). Highlighting the women' s household and subservient roles feminism detects that women are bound to be trained to suit in these roles. So these gender roles are not natural but social, not preordained but created by men. Feminism argues that representation of women as weak, innocent, dependent, naive, docile, blind, irrational, idealistic, and sexual object or procreating device is because of social conditions in which they have to undergo oppressors and have not enough financial and political power to protest their social status. Feminism points out the inequalities between men and women, the subhuman position of women determined by society, religion, and family.

Though feminist view first came to spotlight through the book of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which aims at opposing the male supremacy in society, actually, feminism takes on a spectrum of form and comes in different "waves" in various societies at varying paces. Martha Rampton discusses about the timelines and demands of these waves in her article “ The Three Waves of Feminism” . According to Rampton, most significant and earliest form of feminism known as first wave began in the United Kingdom and gradually spread to the United States and to other parts of the world during the 19th to early 20th century. At first, it focused on the encouragement of equal contract and property rights for women. The resistance of chattel marriage and equalization of the ownership of married women and their children by their husbands also encouraged. By the turn of the century, the importance was given on gaining political power, suffrage and civil rights.

The second wave began in the 1960s and continued into the 90's. This wave stressed on the perspective of the anti-war and civil rights movements and the emerging self-consciousness of a variety of minority groups around the world. Then the New Left was rising, and the voice of the second wave was increasing rapidly. In this wave, sexuality and reproductive rights were prominent issues, and much of the movement' s vigour was poured on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex. The third wave of feminism began in the mid-90 and was influenced by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. In this wave many constructs have been weakened, including the idea of universal womanhood, body, gender, and sexuality. In this phase cyber feminism, eco feminism, and the emergence of postcolonial slant were highlighted.

After a long time of the invention of feminist idea, it became a movement in the late nineteenth century. When the movement was spreading worldwide, American writer Henry James (1843-1916) came with a feminist idea the “ new woman” which refers to those women who were approaching against the restrictions which society imposed on them. The figure of “ new woman” was portrayed in James' s characters Daisy Miller in the novella *Daisy Miller* (1878) and Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* (1881). The number of new women was gradually increasing in Europe and United States as number of women was increasing in economy. Many literary works were written depicting the end of supremacy of male and the women gaining the rights of access to educational institution, bank, having divorce and so on. Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) nurtured the concept of “ new woman” and expressed it in his *A Doll' s House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890). Henry Arthur Jones' s (1851-1929) play *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894) and George Bernard Shaw' s (1856-1950) controversial *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) and *Candida* (1898) are all about the “ new woman” .

When the feminist movement emerged the anti feminist group also arose. First of all the radical change of society could not be accepted by people especially by advantageous men. So the literary works about new women became controversial. Society cannot accept the transformation of innocent women into rebellious women all on a sudden. Therefore the number of anti feminists was larger than the feminists during its first wave of feminism. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* sets probably sometime between 1876 to 1892 and published in 1899. Though that was the period of first wave of feminism the demand of which was the empowerment and liberty of women, he depicted women with same notion of patriarchal society. Though Conrad told his publisher that *Heart of Darkness* is about Congo, “ there is no love interest in it and no woman—only incidentally” (Quoted in McIntire 257), he brought twist and influence in main story through the female characters. Women play obviously the minor characters in the novella, but they are essential to complete the story.

In the novella, the protagonist Marlow' s view of women embodies the typical 19th century view of women as the inferior sex. There are only three relatively minor female characters in *Heart of Darkness*: Marlow' s aunt, Kurtz' s mistress, and Kurtz' s “ Intended” . Marlow mentions these female characters in order to give the literal prospect of his tale more substance. While they definitely play specific roles in the story,

they do not relate with the primary theme of the story. The primary theme focuses more on how Marlow’s journey into the heart of darkness contrasts the white souls of the black people and the black souls of the whites who exploit them, and how it leads to Marlow’s self-discovery.

Marlow first expresses his evaluation about women as inferior when he is badly in need of a job in Congo. To seek help from a woman was so weird, unbelievable and shameful at the time that he describes the incident, “ Then – would you believe it? – I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work – to get a job. Heavens!” (Conrad 34). Again Marlow does not consider the helpful and caring mind of his aunt; rather he highlights her link with the wife of very high personage in the administration and a man who has lots of influence with administration. Here, as a representative of patriarchal society, Marlow comes to get help of a woman only when he has no other option and because the woman has links with powerful men.

Marlow keeps women away from the main events, although they help him to get the job of the company telling lies about Marlow and the company. To influence the wife of high officials, Marlow is presented as an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle by his aunt. She also believes those lies and advises him to help the millions of the ignorant by spreading the lights of education. She is again made to trust that the company is working only for the betterment of the ignorant natives; if they are used as labours, they must get rightful wages. Then Marlow comments about women, “ It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset” (39). It reveals that Marlow knows the true aim of the company which is not charity but profit, but he is not allowed to tell her the truth. Because of such kind of scornful comment by Marlow, many critics declare him a misogynist.

Just as his aunt functions for Marlow as a metonym for all women who are ignorant of the ‘ truth’ and are miserably ‘ out of it’, his profound misanthropy for the population that remains in Europe centers on his scorn for their ignorance, such that his misanthropy parallels his misogyny. (McIntire 263)

Peter Hayes ensures the misogyny of Conrad by quoting Bernard Meyer who refers to Conrad as a “ masochistic misogynist” (97). Hayes also refers to Johanna M. Smith for her strong and straightforward argument to propound Conrad’s patriarchal ideology” (97) through which he describes, when men are out of truth it is because of mistakes and when women are out of truth the responsibility goes to their nature. But if women are always away from truth according to Marlow, the accusation is also sometimes true for him. He also goes to savage world of Congo where “ truth and reality becomes difficult” (Bode 2). When he first sees the mystery of nature, there everything seems “ unreal” (Conrad 52) to him. While describing the forest, the fog, and the darkness, it seems to him he is “ trying to tell a dream” (57) and about a “ fantastic invasion” (52). That is why in case of first visit in Congo, the world seems new and fantastic not only to women but also to men.

When Marlow starts to tell about Mr. Kurtz, the representative of exploiters and lies of company, he describes how he finds out the man, his true nature, many of them know that, many of them do not know, and many of them do not tell the truth about him. Marlow himself is among the last category and hides the truth about Kurtz from Kurtz’s “ Intended”. Marlow mentions the Intended unconsciously as she must come to complete the story. At the first mention of the Intended, Marlow reverts to his opinion of women as completely out of touch with reality. He puts, “ Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it - completely. They - the women, I mean - are out of it - should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse” (74). However, he finds their fantastic visions of world so touching and beautiful that he does not want to disillusion them with the ugly truth. Instead, he claims that men should help to keep women dreaming their beautiful dreams for the welfare of both sexes.

Marlow first mentions the African mistress of Kurtz as “ wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” (100). It suggests that Marlow does not consider women, especially this native African woman, fully human or as capable as men. He describes her:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. (100-101)

It clearly expresses Marlow’s consideration of women as subhuman. He describes this warrior woman’s magnificent ornaments only to put a price on her. At last he values her by several elephant tusks. This dehumanizes her and regards her as an object to be bought at the market with ivory. Among three woman characters, Kurtz’s African mistress has least words actually no word. Marlow describes only her gestures, looks, feelings which are expressed through her eyes and body. Marlow goes there to bring back Kurtz and it is the cause of her rage and sorrow. She cannot prevent them but there is always “ a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain” (101) in her face. On the other hand “ the African woman is given an important

signifying power” (McIntire 260). She does not tell or show anything powerful, but probably her “ savage and superb” (101) appearance and “ ominous and stately” (101) progress holding “ her head high” (100) frighten the white men. If she does something savage or powerful they do not hesitate to “ shoot her” (101) to establish their supremacy.

Kurtz's Intended thinks that he is a great humanitarian and genius but only Marlow knows his evil sides. When Kurtz' s Intended states that “ no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I know him best” (118), it reveals her idealist view. It is the assurance of a naive woman who feels proud and happy about the goodness of her lover and she emphasizes that everyone should value him like her. Her naivety is clearly observed as Marlow remarks, “ the girl talked, easing her pain in the certitude of my sympathy” (119). The Intended is so blinded by her love for Kurtz and her idealism that she plunges herself in the lie she creates and does not even think questioning its authenticity. Marlow does not dare to destroy her beautiful illusion, even when she considers his death “ a loss (. . .) to the world” (119). In this case Marlow sees in the Intended parallels to Kurtz' s other lover, the African woman. Both of them are incapable of ruining an imagined conception of their true love. They both want to believe that Kurtz reciprocates their love absolutely. It is interesting that both of them want the same thing when they live in such different worlds. Even in the end of conversation, Marlow is unable to break the illusionary world of Intended by telling the truth; rather he ends up with another falsehood, the last word of Kurtz is the name of Intended. Without hesitation, she believes it and claims that “ she was sure” (121) about it.

Maybe Marlow's lying to Intended is right in one sense as it is the only thing for her to live for rest of the life a it is the only proof to believe that she is right about Kurtz, her love, her waiting for him is not meaningless. She believes Kurtz loves her in the same way which is assured with the lie of Marlow. But Kurtz is not worthy of such true love. He earns the faith and love easily but ultimately becomes a hypocrite. He is yearning for wealth; greed makes him a blind doll of ivory. He never thinks of returning to the Intended even when he is severely ill rather he takes mistress there. To be in grief knowing the truth is much better than to live on such a lie. On the other hand, Marlow is not happy by making Intended happy with the lie; rather he is in severe grief as he cannot keep the promise of Kurtz. His dissatisfaction is expressed when he puts, “ ...I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due?” (121) Here Marlow is wondering about ensuring proper justice to Kurtz, but he never wonders about the injustice he just has done to the Intended by not telling the truth.

Marlow thinks that women are naive and idealistic, believing in fantastic and utopian worlds that will never work in the reality he knows. He also claims that from the very beginning men are “ living contentedly” (39) with any kind of stern reality and it becomes normal to them, if fraction of these realities touches the illusionary world of women it will “ knock the whole thing over” (39). Conrad's development of such mentality in Marlow represents him as “ a writer of a deeply conservative if not chauvinistic attitude of mind. He believes that men and women are different, that action is largely a male preserve, and that women are defined by their nature in a way that men are not” (Hayes 100). But the point is, if women are not allowed to know the truth, and be part of economical and political change of a country, a person whether woman or man can never be able to know the truth. If they had been allowed to handle the real world from the beginning, they might have adjusted with it. It is not the nature of women being naive and idealistic; rather systems of a society or a country are responsible to encourage them to have these natures from the tender age. Therefore, development of such mindsets in women is not because of the rules of nature, but because of the absence of proper systems for them to cope with the real world.

Another discriminative view of Conrad needs to be highlighted. Though the female characters play minor roles, they should have a name. None of them have their own identity, even “ throughout the book the only female name ever mentioned is the name of the ship. Women are silent and frequently disdained by the paternalistic narrator” (Hinkle 3). Moreover all of them are mentioned with the name in relation they have with other male characters of the novella. They are aunt of Marlow, mistress of Kurtz, Intended of Kurtz. This reveals belief of the writer that women are always subordinate to men and their relation with men is their only identity as they have no right to own anything, even themselves.

Women are also pictured as “ sedentary, stationary, and confined to their own territories” (McIntire 258). Conrad develops typical women characters as they have boundaries in their surroundings. McIntire states:

The aunt sits in her upper middle-class domestic parlor in Belgium as she sends Marlow off to his adventure in Africa; the two knitting women sit in the outer room of the Company offices and glance at the men en route to the Congo; and, at the end of the text, Kurtz's Intended receives Marlow in a ‘ lofty drawing- room’ where they both ‘ sat down’ for their mournful exchange. Even the movement Conrad grants to the African woman at the Inner Station only further emphasizes her essential immobility: she struts along the river bank as she waits at Kurtz's departure, but she, too, is confined to her own territory. (259)

In Conrad's period, women were not allowed to do whatever they wished; they were deprived of their educational, political and economic rights and their territory was restricted by patriarchal system. The same

situation is presented and similar picture is portrayed in this novella. The rules are almost same in case of civilized women in England and savage women in Africa. Eta

Being a writer of the period of first wave of feminist concern Conrad earns popular impression and “ as a male-oriented author of nautical tales coincides with his reputation for awkwardness with women” (Jones 6). In the novella, he shows that positions of high officials in administration are only captured by men and having the power of supremacy, men exercise it in wrong and corrupted ways. Men hate to take help of women; ultimately they use them building their future, but do not give them enough dignity. Men make their subservient believe their lies and persuade them very easily. Men measure women by wealth, go close to them whenever they need, and leave them whenever they want. Men hide their evil sides and become heroes to the naive women showing their good sides. Men keep women waiting a long time, although they enjoy their lives in their own way.

Many critics defend Conrad's being a misogynist. Peter Hayes draws the suggestion of Jeremy Hawthorn, Peter Hyland and Mahmoud Kharbutli that “ Conrad subtly criticized patriarchal ideology by exposing its insidious effect on women” (98) and Ruth L. Nedelhaft’ s focus on women’ s “ fight back” (98) in *Heart of Darkness*. He also shows arguments of Nedelhaft and Andrew M. Roberts for establishing Conrad not as a defender but as the critic of patriarchal society (100). On the other hand from Ian Watt asserts:

Marlow's misogyny may seem a somewhat less disabling prejudice if it is set in the context of his general view of life. What he says clearly refers, not to the women who work in the office of the Trading Company, for instance or to Kurtz's naive mistress, but quite specially to women of the well-to-do and leisured class to whom his aunt and the Intended, and presumably the womenfolk of his audience, belong. (83)

Thus Conrad's defenders shield him with overall three claims: first, his view is not synonymous to his protagonist; second, insufficient influence of forming a powerful woman character and third is the female picture of novel is not his but the male views of women. But after the feminist study of the novella, these claims cannot stand strong. Nina Pelikan Straus comments like many other critics:

The contextuality of Conrad's tale, the deliberate use of a frame to include readers as hearers, suggests the secret nature of what is being told, a secrecy in which Conrad seems to join Marlow. The peculiar density and inaccessibility of *Heart of Darkness* may be the result of its extremely masculine historical referentiality, its insistence on a male circle of readers. (124)

Marlow represents Conrad as both of them are story tellers to the readers. Conrad’ s typical and idealized depiction of women is not “ unconscious aberrations in the work of an otherwise profound writer” (Hayes 115). It is not a sudden work but the plot is based on his personal experience in Congo during 1890, therefore, his portrayals of women is not fictional but a “ deliberate expression of an integral part of his philosophy” (115). According to many critics, not only *Heart of Darkness* but also most of his novel; like *Almayer’ s Folly* (1895), *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Chance* (1913) show his nonchalance and superior patriarchal consciousness in portraying women.

All attitudes of men towards women drawn in *Heart of Darkness* are beliefs and practices of a patriarchal person. Instead of lessening the supremacy of men, Conrad takes away the language of the female characters; instead of giving some fundamental rights to women characters, Conrad wants to keep them away from novella; instead of taking women as complementary to men, he declares women as hindrances to their prosperity. This novella is all about the symbolical expression of real experiences of Joseph Conrad. It is about the exploration of evil side of human soul which was kept hidden from the innocent European women of the nineteenth century. But these innocent women unconsciously help men and sacrifice a lot for these evil systems of plundering wealth of another innocent and so called uncivilized people. Here the so called civilized women folk and the uncivilized African nations are analogous in many ways. Though many critics do not accept Conrad as a misogynist and defend him from different points of view, his prejudice towards women is easily recognizable.

When we peel away the layers of the story of the novella, we can discover a different journey which is hidden under the journey of making an uncivilized nation civilized. It is not the exploration of Dark Continent; rather it is the venture of exploring dormant dark depravity of human soul. The more we go inside the more savage darkness of soul reveals. Though Conrad contrasts the theme of light and darkness with Europe and Africa, respectively the underlying darkness of human soul reigns everywhere in different forms. The discriminating social systems white men create for oppressing the weak, the disrespect they show by playing hypocrite roles with their women in the novella, are not less brutal than the savagery of ignorant African people. Maybe it can be acceptable in a savage society to follow the rules of nature, but a civilized society should not differentiate people on excuse of natural rules. As humans women must be allowed to access to all facilities of civilization so that they can prove their worth and compete with others with their intellect. Everything of society remains incomplete if a half of the people are kept away from its progression process. Being an admirer as well

as a patronage of the patriarchal society, Conrad ought not to exclude women from his *Heart of Darkness* as they are the inseparable part of society and valuable part of humankind.

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Shirin Akter “ ‘ It's Queer How Out Of Touch With Truth Women Are” : A Feminist Study of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 24 no. 08, 2019, pp. 08-13.