



KURTZ AND MADNESS: A REPRESENTATION KURTZ'S MADNESS IN THE NOVELLA HEART OF DARKNESS

Eesha Saini

Christ University, Bengaluru, Karnataka.

One of the foremost impacts of Belgian Colonialization on the natives of Congo Free State over the years between 1890-1908, due to physical violence, sagacity, superiority, power, greed and exploitation was marginalization. Joseph Conrad in his novella *Heart of Darkness*, written in the same time-period (as a serial form in 1898 and published as a book in 1902), designates this process of marginalization leading to mental disorder, which is denoted as “madness” in the novella. Kurtz, is a central fictional character in the novella, who projects this notion of madness along with other characters. The research paper will explore how his character leads to growth of madness within himself and outside, how this feature is assimilated by the author and narrator to describe the acts of criminality, and what are the different representation through which Kurtz's identity has been represented. It will be studied under four representations of madness i.e. autobiographical, political, symbolic and psychological representations. Carl Jung's theory of Collective Unconscious will also be employed. The paper, therefore, attempts to analyse Kurtz's identity which is associated with madness in the novella.

In “Heart of Darkness and Late-Victorian Fascination with the Primitive and the Double” Samir Elbarbary, transcribes the interest in the Late-Victorian society towards duality in human character and behaviour. He defines this duality as an indicator of how primitivism is also linked with “savagery” and savages being considered as inferior or mad which is why, white people consider themselves only as the guiding lights towards enlightenment. The article by Tony Ward on “State Crime” which is presented in the novella, he describes how Kurtz epitomizes King Leopold, under whose rule, “massacre, hostage-taking, rape, death by starvation because of state or company actions, and extremes of physical cruelty were common occurrences (Ward 626).” An extensive report on “Madness and murder” by William A. Hammond suggests that an “uncontrollable will” to kill becomes a primary driving force that results into carnage which gives satisfaction to this urge. Human psyche plays an important role which can result into an excessive desire to kill oneself or others. Xiaoni Li, in his article “Light and Dark Symbols in *Heart of Darkness*” elucidates the usage of the words- white, light, black, dark, jungle, fog and many others, as significant symbols and how through these words “the author overthrows people's common understanding of those symbols”. Through these symbols, certain attributes are given to the characters. The research paper will incorporate and elaborate these ideas with instances from the novella in further in analysis.

Conrad adopts a different style of writing to highlight the feature of madness in the novella, which has been approved and criticized widely. On one hand, he seems to defend the natives of Congo Free State and through frame narrative, tries to bring out their suffering in an ambiguous tone, on the other hand, critics have accused him of being a racist. The printed version of lecture delivered in University of Massachusetts, Chinua Achebe, a novelist and critic, reflects upon the novella *Heart of Darkness*, and calls Conrad a “bloody racist”. His views on the novella differ from majority readers and he finds his text as a material which has dehumanised Africans in an ambiguous way. He states that Kurtz's transformation from a “universal genius” to ‘mad’ is an indirect comment upon savages who are responsible for Kurtz's transformation. The colonial irony is projected with a contrast when Marlow narrates the condition of the natives and then he states that all the natives are working for the colonizers as “They were building a railway.” (Page 24). By showing the negative or horrible effects on the Europeans when they visited the dark continent, he says that Conrad has portrayed a negative image of the continent as well as the natives. The natives have thus become infectious or dehumanised who have corrupted even the sane of people including Kurtz. Therefore, Conrad projects one reality that Kurtz has become mad due to the environment in which he lived amongst the savages.

Joseph Conrad in this novella has incorporated various semi-autobiographical descriptions which have highlighted the state, the acts and practices of the colonizers and the suffering of the colonized. The novella is a narration over the time-period when King Leopold was ruling and exercising his brutal practises over the state and natives. Conrad himself travelled through the same river and wilderness as Marlow has described in the text, and saw the horrors of the Belgian colonialists. The character of Kurtz is strongly related to King Leopold represents all that he has exercised i.e. violence, power, lust for money. But Conrad does not incorporate these experiences and opinions directly towards Kurtz's madness but through his narrator, who further tells the story of Marlow. The character of Kurtz is thus framed through the depiction of Marlow's character. Through the journey and the situations, he undergoes, run parallel with character and reader gets the hint of Kurtz's own journey. From the beginning and in the entire course of the journey, Marlow is depicted showing gradual changes in his characteristic behaviour. Marlow is shown suffering through these changes as he says to his companions on the boat, “I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally... (Page 10). The ambiguity which is retained in the sentence through partially revealing the changes, suggests the effects of the place on Marlow. “I flew around like mad to get ready,



and before forty-eight hours I was crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers, and sign the contract. (Page 14). The character of Kurtz is specifically described indicating Marlow's mental sickness, his political ideologies which led him into this jungle and how he is at present among the savages.

The journey itself becomes the first milestone of the wilderness of savages. Through Marlow, Kurtz's journey provides the first parallel link between both the characters and the political conditions. The novel begins with the description of the journey of each place where Marlow finds a halt, the river, and finally the outer and the inner stations he encounters. Through the description of the state and the colonizers he builds the theme of madness by symbolic words like "darkness", "horror" and so forth. "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness." (Page 58) The physical journey is followed by the inner journey, journey into the primitive states of mind. Marlow says, "A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ajar. I slipped through one of the cracks, went up a swept and unadorned staircase, as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to." (Page 14) The "narrow and deserted street in deep shadow" is where Kurtz and Marlow both look for light within their own minds. Through the symbolic descriptions of State and journey, Marlow himself becomes the symbol for Kurtz.

The novella also represents his madness through various other symbols, instances and physical attributes, directly and indirectly. The paper deals with only those symbols which have been used in association with Kurtz's madness. The terms 'mad' or 'madness' have been majorly used for savages, as a warning for Marlow when he is about to set for the journey to the inner station and Kurtz, who is ultimately responsible for the exploitation of the state of Congo, and of his own mental health and changes. The state of Congo itself becomes a symbol in the novella, which displays the primitive, wilderness which ultimately affects the human mind, as Marlow describes, "Land in a swamp, march through woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery. Had closed round him-all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men." (Page 8)

With the description of the physical and political conditions he then introduces Kurtz as been told by the manager, "In the interior you will no doubt meet Mr. Kurtz" (Page 29) the interior becomes both the interior of the jungle and the interior of the mind where the darkness resides. Xiaoni Li, in his article "Light and Dark Symbols in *Heart of Darkness*" elucidates the usage of the words- white, light, black, dark, jungle, fog and many others, as significant symbols and how through these words "the author overthrows people's common understanding of those symbols". Through these symbols, certain attributes are given to the characters. Xiaoxi writes that Kurtz, who is described as a "universal genius" in the beginning of the novella is shown fading in the fog of savagery and "when Marlow first learns of Kurtz's activities in the jungle, he attributes Kurtz's moral downfall or madness to his lack of connectedness with civilization. Marlow blames the dark, mysterious force of the jungle for Kurtz's actions" (Xiaoxi 85). "Why! He's mad?" I said. He protested indignantly. Mr. Kurtz couldn't be mad. If I had heard him talk, only two days ago, I wouldn't dare hint at such a thing..." (Page 96) The dialogue of Kurtz being mad exchanged between Marlow and the manager hints at Kurtz being mysteriously mad due to some reason. The reason become clear when he says, "But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad." (Page 113) The symbols become more prominent and Kurtz is ultimately established as a mad character. "His was an impenetrable darkness." (Page 117)

Madness of Kurtz can also be explained through psychological approaches. The Doctor in the novella becomes both a metaphor as well as a real character revealing the idea of how living with the savages and the desire for power and wealth lead to changes which are deeply rooted and come on the surface when they are slowly dig. Before Marlow is set for his journey he his recommended to visit a doctor to complete the process of tests. He says, "There was yet a visit to the doctor. 'A simple formality', assured me the secretary, with an air of taking an immense part in all my sorrows" (Page 16). The sorrow which is displayed towards Marlow is due to the anticipation of madness through which he will suffer once he sets off for his journey. Marlow describes the doctor's remarks while examining him before the journey, "... and moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.' He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. (Page 17) The doctor indicates how madness will be the major factor for which Marlow will become just like Kurtz. The psychological changes in the novella can also be explained through Carl Jung's theory of collective unconsciousness which deals with aspects of human psyche.

"The collective unconscious is the storehouse of the latent memory traces from one's ancestral past, a past that includes not only the racial history of humans as a separate species but also their prehuman or animal ancestry as well." (Hall 85). The repeated experiences over the years form a "psychic residue" which gets accumulated. These residues are not inherited as such but are the result of common evolution. *Heart of Darkness* with its title itself suggests a comparison between the



darkness of the savages and the darkness of the hearts of colonizers. These colonizers become the inheritors of the past i.e. the practice of colonization and immense brutality, to treat non-whites as inferior and poor, to consider those tribes who live in the forests and wilderness as animals or even worse than that. The concept is also elaborated by Michelle Rozzo in his article, “Marlowe’s Questionable Racism: The Struggle between Human Sentiment and Nurtured Principles.” He uses the term “human sentiment” and “nurtured principles” to define how psychology has affected the development of imperialism because of which Marlow becomes extremely judgemental towards the breakdown of Kurtz’s mental order.

“The structural components of the collective unconscious are called by various names: archetypes, primordial images, imagoes, mythological images, and behaviour patterns.” (Jung, 1947). Jung claimed to identify many archetypes but paid special attention to four- the persona, anima/animus, shadow and self. The research paper will identify Kurtz’s madness with this theory under two archetypes which are persona and shadow. The other two aspects can be applied to in further studies.

The “persona” (or mask) is the outward face we present to the world. It conceals our real self and Jung describes it as the “conformity” archetype. This is the public face or role a person presents to others as someone different to who we really are. It is the role assigned to one by society, the part that society expects one to play in life. Kurtz was the “universal genius” and the most successful businessman for the Belgian Empire. But soon after he entered the jungle his true persona came in front and instead of the idea and mission of spreading the light in the state of Congo, the true self of everlasting greed for money and power is revealed through the way he executes the plan of administration. The final words he utters before dying, “the horror! The Horror!” becomes symbolic of this persona which Kurtz identified within himself in his final moment.

Shadow is another component of archetype. This is the animal side of our personality (like the id in Freud) which is inherited from the lower forms of life. It is the source of both our creative and destructive energies. The most prominent instance of shadow in the novella is through the description of Marlow when he first sees Kurtz on all fours like an animal. The idea of this description is suggestive of the hidden destructive energies like animals in Kurtz, as Jung describes in his theory. Also, when Marlow witnesses the natives in the jungle crawling on all fours and drinking water from the lake by lowering down their faces directly into the water body, not only it gives the idea of their suffering but the animal like identity which has been established.

There are few instances in the novella where the sentences are left unfinished and thus with ambiguity, it adds multiple meanings. For instance, the doctor while examining Marlow comments, “...’interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but...” (Page 17). Here the doctor describes the gradual changes which occur in a personality towards mental health. These gradual changes have occurred in Kurtz as he went there as a “universal genius” and has resulted into a “mad soul”. Ambiguity in the text also persists with the fact that Conrad made major changes in the original manuscript before publishing it as a novella. An article titled, “Heart of Darkness: The Manuscript Revisions” by Johna Ruskin, deals with the comparison of the original text or the manuscript written by Conrad and the revised text that became the novella. The article suggests that here are multiple changes that Conrad has made in his manuscript either to highlight the mood, the significance or making the text obscure in some places to reveal inward characteristics of the characters and the settings. The article also deals with the explanations of some of the lines by Conrad and why certain phrases and words are used and edited in the making of the novella. As the author says, Conrad wanted readers to interpret the text not from the eyes of the colonizer but through the colonized. The ambiguity therefore remains how Conrad wanted to portray Kurtz’s character.

Madness thus becomes an outcome of lust, power, money and the conquest of never ending greed for authority and knowledge. As Marlow describes the physical appearance of Kurtz witnessed by himself, he says, “I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror- of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?” (Page 118) Therefore, the novella deals in a very ambiguous as well as in an explanatory manner how Kurtz has fallen into a mad character. Though these influences have often been considered as extremely racist by critics but what Conrad tries to create in this novella is figure of the past, present and future. The past figure can be compared to the works and deeds of brutal behaviour by the colonists, the present figure becomes an imitation of the King Leopold who led to the devastation of Congo and the future figure which he highlights through his dying sentence, “The Horror! The horror!” denoting the coming of time when extremely brutality will still be practiced which will lead towards the doom of many such rulers like Kurtz, consumed in their own madness.

Works Cited

1. Achebe, Chinua. “An Image of Africa.” *Research in African Literatures* 9.1(1978): 1-15. Web. 26 June 2016.
Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.



2. Elbarbary, Samir. "Heart of Darkness and Late-Victorian Fascination with the Primitive and the Double." *Twentieth Century Literature* 39.1 (1993): 113-128. Web. 14 June 2016.
3. Hall, Calvin S., Gardner Lindzey, and John B. Campbell. *The Theories of Personality*. 4th ed. Delhi: Sunny Offset Process, 2014. Print.
4. Hammond, William. "Madness and Murder." *The North American Review* 147. 385(1888): 626-637. Web. 15 June 2016.
5. Li, Xiaoxi. (May 2008) Light and Dark Symbols in Heart Of Darkness. *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 4, No. 5. 85-87. Print.
6. Lushington, Mark Simon. "Heart of Darkness and Cultural Nationalism." *A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies* 6.4(2008). Web. 13 Sept. 2016.
7. Raskin, Jonah. "Heart of Darkness: The Manuscript Revisions" *The Review of English Studies* 18.69(1967):30-39. Web. 22 July 2016.
8. Rizzo, Michelle. "Marlowe's Questionable Racism: The Struggle between Human Sentiment and Nurtured Principles." *The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research* 6.1(1999): 100-108. Web. 19 Aug. 2016.