



“Women in a World of Their Own”: A Feminist Reworking of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a novel that has been known for its discriminatory and racist nature. The writer develops the narrative surrounding various characters, primarily allowing space for the adventures and struggles of men, while also focussing on the discrimination and rampant exploitation of natives of Africa and other colonised nations. Conrad portrays women in the novel as being fragile and weak, who constantly need to be under a layer of protection from the adversities of the real world. They are forced into a limited surrounding that is controlled for their ‘protection’ without any opportunity of experiencing and achieving anything on their own accord. Under this false garb of protection, women are even now constantly denied a means to express themselves, as men continue to hold supremacy in a patriarchal society. This paper attempts to view the novel through a feminist perspective, analysing the portrayal of women and their position in the late nineteenth century, while establishing a relationship with the condition of women in contemporary times.

Key words: Feminism, patriarchy, power structure, rebellion, supremacy.

Joseph Conrad’s widely known novel *Heart of Darkness* narrates the conditions of the late nineteenth century, giving accounts of colonisation and rampant exploitation of Africa, among other colonised countries. The novel narrates the adventures of the writer through the character of Marlowe, with an autobiographical portrayal of events as well as characters from the experiences of Conrad. Colonisation and its effects can be seen even in contemporary times on the countries that were ruled by British forces, but the exploitation during the late nineteenth century under the pretext of modernising the third world nations pushed back their development even further. Conrad uses the character of Marlow to expose the hypocrisy of the white man and ‘economic barbarianism’ that was apparent in their actions during this period. Throughout the novel, there can be seen a clear divide between the white man and the colonised population, while also including women, be it from the coloniser country or that of the colonised. The position of women is portrayed by the novelist in a patriarchal light, ignoring the efforts of several revolutionary movements against female discrimination during the late nineteenth century. The white man is the creator of hierarchy in the society, as the voiceless are rendered helpless through their further marginalisation to maintain white supremacy which also holds its power on the women of their own ethnicity.



Viewing the novel through a feminist perspective, it can be clearly seen that women have been greatly marginalised and omitted in the story whereas men throughout take centre stage. The novel which is about travelling and voyages certainly does not see any woman character being a part of the movement or the literal as well as the metaphorical crossing of boundaries as they remain fixated on the patriarchal roles and duties that they have been assigned. The women are scarcely given a proper name or identification which shows how the narrator chooses to view them as mere objects and also finds it more convenient to group them under one category without allowing them any chance of individuality or voice to express themselves or their views regarding the major issues in the novel.

Though certain female characters are portrayed in the novel by giving them space in the narrative as well, they occupy basic and minor roles that are included to show their mere presence which is completely patriarchal in nature, adhering to the roles that are defined for women by men in the society. They are mostly absent from the main narrative or as described by McIntire, “Ghost-like, half presences” and the parts where they are allowed some space by the narrator, are mostly either to understand the nature of the character of Kurtz or are allowed to be portrayed through male ideologies of the British society at the time. Conrad states his views regarding women in the novel:

“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. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over” (15)

The world of adventures and explorations does not seem to be one for females. They have been assigned roles which set well according to the 19th-century idea of an ideal woman, removed from ‘dark realities’ of the real world in which men strive and fight to sustain themselves. Marlowe describes their world as being beautiful and one which is unlike any ever been. He says that they live in a completely secure and protected state which is imperative for their survival, as otherwise, they would be unable to adjust. These women are unable to break the spaces they have been confined to, be it cultural or ideological boundaries. The perfect example of a woman character justifying these views of Marlowe is Kurtz’s ‘Intended’, who is again given no name, showing the lack of importance of the roles of women in the novel, denying any sort of individuality. As Marlowe first meets her, it is towards the end of the novel in London where she is shown to be in mourning even after a year of Kurtz’s death which proves the point of women living in their own made-up world, unaware of the reality surrounding them. She’s shown as a mature woman with a steady mourning expression on her face.

Marlowe has been described by several critics as being ‘misogynistic’, referring to women as background characters throughout the narrative. Women only play the part of subordinates as their efforts are neither highlighted nor recognised, reiterated by Bernard Meyer who refers to him as “masochistic misogynist” (48), denying women an equal stand with men in society. The character of Kurtz’s ‘Intended’ is portrayed by Conrad as being in a complete state of obscurity about the nature of Kurtz once he starts living in Africa and is involved in an affair with a native woman. Marlowe again decides to preserve her faith by lying to her about the last words said by Kurtz, telling her that he had said her name. This lady who had complete faith in her beloved, and was sure of his actions being nothing short of greatness, certainly failed to foresee the kind of man Kurtz became once he came in contact with wilderness and away from a civilised society. She would have been shocked to know the real facts about the man whom she



thought she knew more than anyone else in the world, such as the solution that he came up with in order to deal with Africans, stating ‘exterminate all the brutes’ as well as the grotesque idea of hanging human heads as a part of decoration around tents.

Women, according to Marlow, serve the purpose of physical beauty rather than anything meaningful as he states, “We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse” (61), expressing that women must be hidden from the realities of the world they live in as they would be unable to survive. The fact that Marlowe understands that a woman such as Kurtz’s fiancée would not be able to handle the harsh reality of Kurtz, further solidifies the patriarchal views prevailing in the novel.

In contrast to Kurtz ‘Intended’, comes another main female character without a name, called the native woman. Marlow describes her as being an impressive personality, high headed and “treading the Earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments.” (76). She wore several necklaces of beads on her neck and had the value of several elephant tusks on her as she was after all the mistress of Kurtz. The narrator describes the native woman in a way that justifies the entrapment that Kurtz felt once he came in contact with the wilderness of Africa. The physical description of the woman overflows with a kind of strength that the entire environment was a symbol of, which makes Kurtz captive and he completely refuses to leave until his very death. The narrator describes the native woman as a wild and gorgeous woman who was savage and superb, along with ominous savagery in her, being in complete contrast to the civilised British society as well as Kurtz intended. These wild and savage aspects of the woman as well as the surroundings of Africa basically brought out the primal instincts which were suppressed in Kurtz at the beginning. The narrator describes her stating:

“A wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. 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...” (77)

Thus, the fairly powerful female character that has been included in the novel though provides a stronger image in the feminist view, but it is a primary part of the novel only to bring out the character of Kurtz being the main male character in the narrative and is not supposed to be seen in her own image. Although this character is shown as a much stronger individual compared to the ‘Intended’, she is still a prisoner and is under the command of Kurtz, a white man only using her for physical pleasures.

Marlowe refuses to provide women with any substantial position, even if they play important roles in procuring his dream job. Assessing another woman’s character and the role she plays in the narrative is that of Marlowe’s aunt. This character plays a fairly important role in his life as it is only because of her that Marlowe can go on the adventure. Without the help of this lady, he would have been unable to acquire the job of a skipper to the Belgium steamer on his own, but we clearly see how Marlowe refuses to provide the woman character with the due importance she deserves, through several lines in the narrative. While his aunt with all her efforts, finds and brings to him this perfect opportunity to fulfil his dreams, Marlowe still refuses to budge from his old patriarchal and stagnant views which confine women in a particular kind of image of a Victorian woman. He emphasises the fact that it is through her ‘contacts’ which were men, she was able to secure him this opportunity, hence denying women any kind of importance and



according to him, their world is divorced from the realities of life.

The readers come across several other female characters, including the two knitting women whom Marlowe meets while he goes for his interview with his employer. Similar to others, these two women are fixated and confined to their positions while seeing men who would be soon going on different adventures and it is as if they are completely denied a character in their own individual right. The narrator symbolises these women as being the 'guardians of the door of darkness' while he describes their behaviour. Though they seem to have an important job to do, they certainly are not given enough power to work outside of their confinement.

Although we do see women characters in the narrative in their own space, Conrad allows hardly any attention to them concerning the development of the plot or the adventure as such. These women are only secondary characters fulfilling their set duties in the chronology of the narrative without any individual space. But even though the novel undermines the capabilities of the women and their understanding of the real world, some do strive to gain the strength of characters like the native women and the two knitting women including a few others. Hence, their roles are not only limited to understanding the character of either Kurtz or of background characters, they do allow the readers to gain a wider perspective of the novel.

Alternatively, Conrad could have narrated the novel with the inclusion of women with a voice of their own, by subverting the set patriarchal norms of the late nineteenth century, as several voices were being raised to provide women the space they deserve, by granting them basic rights and liberties, he chose to minimise their role in the society. *Heart of Darkness* serves as an important novel, allowing readers to understand the darkness that lies in the heart of humans and the greed that makes a man into a demon. The darkness of the human heart reveals that the lust for money and power turns a man into a savage in its real sense. The discrimination by white men towards the suppressed, including women, denies basic equality in the face of modernisation that was termed as the 'white man's burden'. It is imperative to allow women the status of an equal, rather than constantly forcing them to adhere to the roles of an unequal so that they are given a chance to establish themselves, their identity, and 'self' in society.

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