

---

## Theme of Darkness in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

*Rajinder Kaur Saggu*

*Associate Professor, PG Dept of English, Guru Nanak Khalsa College for Women  
Ludhiana (PB), India.*

---

Darkness is a major theme in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It is the central motif and serves as a pivot around which the whole novel revolves. Darkness is the central image and all the other images in the novel contribute to the development of it. In the larger framework of the novel, Darkness is an image and a symbol as well as the total effect. Darkness at multiple levels such as physical, political, moral and psychological, has been dealt with in the novel. The images, when studied along with these various levels of darkness, help us understand the meaning and implications of darkness.

The novel is in the form of a journey that Marlow undertakes to the dark centre of Africa, the heart of darkness. In the beginning, we have five men cruising on Thames river. It is the time of dusk and gets darker and darker as the story progresses and time lapses.

They are surrounded by darkness:

The air was dark above Gravesend,  
and farther back still seemed condensed  
into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless  
over the biggest, and the greatest,  
town on earth.(p. 5)

this remark sets the tone for what is to follow, that is, it forebodes the atmosphere of gloom and darkness that pervades the following narrative. Here, Conrad is dealing with darkness only on the physical level. The first remark of Marlow about "the monstrous town" is, "And this also, has been one of the dark places of the earth" (p.7) Although what Marlow means by this is something else that we come to know afterwards, this remark here alongwith the physical darkness surrounding these men hints at the atmosphere of darkness, that is to pervade the whole novel. After this, Marlow begins his narrative and we get a fine description of the atmosphere when he is telling us about the journey after the central station towards the inner station.

He says, "Going up that river(Congo) was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, and sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine"(p.48).

The images of fog, mist and ineffectiveness of sunshine in the physical description of the place point out the sense of corruption. Atmosphere is not simply a background, it is an essence vitally affecting the spirit of the work. Here, it is a description of natural phenomena thrown upon the scene of a tropic setting to heighten the sense of corruption. The images here are omens of something evil that is to follow and which does in the shape of the corruption brought on by the white men in the dark Africa. The river itself is described in ominous tones, "a mighty big river, resembling an immense snake uncoiled"(p.12).

The snake image has Biblical associations. It reminds us of Satan and thus, is an ill-omen. It tempts Marlow as he himself says, "The snake had charmed me"(p.12). The river that is like a snake, is symbolic of spiritual decay, mental delusion and demonic possession. It is a symbol of man's invincible urge for savagery.

*Heart of Darkness* is concerned with the somber theme of human darkness made more powerful and appealing by its locale in the dark forests of Congo. The forest is black, dark, an "impenetrable nothingness", symbolic of the impenetrable savagery of human heart. Once Marlow enters this region, all his ties with civilization- faith, fidelity and belonging- are snapped: "Gone, disappeared, swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind" (p.57). Hence, the forest with its fog is a symbol of spiritual evil which makes Marlow aware of his alienation from humanity. Its darkness represents the spiritual darkness of Kurtz and the pilgrims. "The brooding gloom (of the forest) is an ingress into the heart of darkness which has produced Kurtz who has cut himself off from civilization and established his solidarity with the power of blackness by his total surrender to it." (Inamdar, P.48). Kurtz had gone to Congo as an apostle of light but through egoism, he becomes spiritually empty, gets isolated from the rest of the humanity and surrenders himself to darkness.

This brings us to the interpretation of darkness at the moral level. Kurtz, the central figure of the novel, goes to Africa, comes under the spell of surrounding primitive culture and begins to lose his grip on civilization. Driven by an obsessive desire for power, he becomes a virtual god among the natives of Congo region. He participates in their dark rituals, develops relations with one of their women and achieves unity with the savage soul. But this experience and knowledge of his own heart kill him. Kurtz had gone to Congo to spread civilization and bring back ivory. Ivory is a symbol of man's fall. Though white in colour, it prompts black deeds. From a man of high ideals, Kurtz degenerates into a sub-human level of existence. The apostle of light gets engulfed in darkness of his own being. Darkness is the pervasive evil in the human heart. The light of reason, of goodness fails him and he ends up surrendering himself to the heart of darkness. "The darkness over the river, the city, the forest is not simply the effect of physical darkness of the common night but the representation of the primitive and barbarous states of man and of moral evil." (Inamdar, pp.68-9) Kurtz falls from a highly civilized status to the barbarous state of existence by surrendering himself to evil powers.

Evil is born out of a lack of restraint and goodness out of devotion to a belief. Kurtz doesn't have any restraint: "He had no restraint, no restraint - a tree swayed by the wind" (p.73). Kurtz's lack of restraint is again certified when Marlow tells us about the human heads on stakes that form a kind of fence around his house: "They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lust..." (p.83). Once released from the restraints of the civilized world, he gives free rein to his savage instincts and as a result gets morally corrupted and degenerated. What is dark in the darkest Africa is not the land or the people but the world introduced by the pseudo-reformers like Kurtz, the emissaries of light and civilization who in the name of reformation and civilization robbed the land and the people of their natural gifts. It is not the darkness of the human ignorance of the natives but the darkness of the white man who have blinded themselves by corruption and indulgence in theft and exploitation. Kurtz is a representative of this darkness and so are the Chief-Accountant at the Sea-Board Station and the Manager at the Central Station.

Conrad in this novel, is dealing mainly with the theme of ultimate reality and this ultimate reality is darkness. Congo represents something that is beyond civilization and beyond falsehood and corruption. It is Kurtz who takes these traits of civilization with him to

Congo. But once there, he realizes the darkness within himself. He realizes the darkness, the reality of his own being and his existence and dies. Kurtz is "hollow at the core". He is like "The Hollow-Men" of T.S. Eliot who cannot bear too much of reality for too long. Kurtz, being hollow, cannot bear the reality once he has realized which he pronounces in his last words "The Horror: The Horror". The words are a result of a wholly inward journey, that into the immense darkness, which Kurtz makes after coming to Congo. They are a judgement passed on the whole human existence implying that all human existence is futile and that the only and the ultimate reality is darkness which is horrifying. And yet, Marlow interprets these words as having been "an affirmation, a moral victory". It was the moment of supreme knowledge for Kurtz but this knowledge proved too much for him.

This brings us to the theme of reality and appearance. According to Conrad, civilization is only a mask that the human-beings wear over their faces hiding the reality behind. The mask is necessary for survival because once a human-being comes in contact with the reality, he dies for lack of strength to bear it. The reality is darkness which kills. The savagery and barbarousness of Congo represent this reality. Conrad assumes that the savages represent a direct ancestry upon which we may disastrously regress. Kurtz succumbed to the darkness, the reality. Marlow only gets a peep at it and comes back shuddering from his contact with reality. He retains his civilization and comes back to the sepulchral city. The dread inspired by the reality makes him tell a lie to "Intended" of Kurtz. "Intended" has all along believed in the mask, the civilization, and its values. But, according to Conrad this is only an illusion. Had Marlow told her the truth, she could not have borne it because in order to survive, she must believe steadfastly in the illusion of civilization. Disillusionment would only have resulted in death. She needs something to live with, to hold on to. And she gets it in the form of Marlow's lie that Kurtz's last words had been her name. Marlow has realized that the world is false, the civilization only an illusion but still, he prefers to live on. He realizes that he should believe in this illusion and help others to believe in theirs if they are all to survive.

The mist and the fog that surround Marlow's steam-boat at one point in his progress to the Inner Station are symbols of appearance hiding the stark reality of darkness. The Chief-Accountant and the Manager are like this fog. They have deceptive appearances. Beneath these appearances is hidden the reality, the corruption and the darkness. About the Chief-Accountant, Marlow says, "His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearances... His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character"(p.26). In contrast to this appearance, he has brought a demoralization to the land which is evident in the scenes Marlow sees of native men bound together by chains and subjected to inhuman treatment. The only quality of the Manager at the Central Station is that he keeps the routine going, originating nothing. And the routine is to kill the natives and send ivory out.

The novel also deals with the subject of European imperialism and Conrad works out this theme through the imagery of darkness. There are strong political overtones in the novel. At one point in history, King Leopold II of Belgium owned Congo. The King had gone there which the superficial intention of civilizing the natives but in fact, robbed the land. Kurtz too, like the King, had gone to Congo as a torch-bearer of civilization but plunders the region. The British were industrialized and needed colonies for raw material and markets for their products. They chose Africa and Asia for this purpose. They went there for economic exploitation in the guise of civilizing the natives. As already said, Africa itself is not dark but it is the darkness of exploitation of human values and ideals that Congo witnesses. When in the beginning of the novel, Marlow remarks about London as having

been one of the dark places of the earth, he is, in fact, thinking of very old times, when Romans first invaded the place. The darkness of the place that Marlow refers to is not the physical darkness but the darkness of plunder and murder that the Romans brought. But this darkness is different from the one brought about by the Europeans in modern times. As Marlow says, the Romans were only conquerors and grabbed what they could: "It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness" (p.10). What makes the Europeans worse is that their invasion was accompanied by a certain idealism too alongwith the intentions of loot. In this case, the darkness becomes all the more hideous as it involves the degeneration of human idealism and values. Straying from their real path makes the darkness of their exploitation all the more horrible as contrasted with the human invaders.

The novel depicts human-beings' unchecked imperialistic exploitation that has reduced their kind to animals. The bearers of light have spread darkness. It portrays "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration." (Guerard, p-110) Kurtz is a representative of this scramble for loot but the darkness of his own deeds, his own mind overpowers him in the end. He himself becomes the heart of darkness. Marlow says, "His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the Sun never shines" (p.99). The darkness of Congo had claimed him as his own and patted him. But in this darkness of the wilderness, his soul was alone. Being alone, "it had looked within itself, and, by Heavens, I tell you, it had gone mad" (p.95). For his evil actions, for the darkness that he brought, the wilderness, the darkness of Congo take "on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion" (p.83). Kurtz had taken upon himself the role of a demi-god among the savages who used to crawl before him. In the end, these imperialistic tendencies get the better of him and he dies horrified at the reality, the darkness of his evil deeds.

Finally, darkness had psychological connotations too, which are worked out through the metaphors of journey and dream. Marlow's journey is a journey into the abyss of human mind. This journey motif is blended with savagery: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (p.48). The river here is a symbol of human mind. Conrad represents what the world was at the beginning when there was no civilization. Marlow says, "It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience" (p.11). It is the farthest point of the inexplicable depths of human darkness and the unexpressed depths of man's meanness.

The novel is a journey into the unconscious and confrontation of an entity within the self. Kurtz represents this unconscious which may be equivalent to the Freudian Id or the Jungian shadow. According to Albert J. Guerard, "The true night journey can occur only in sleep or in the waking dream of a profoundly intuitive mind. Marlow insists more than is necessary on the dream-like quality of his narrative, It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream-making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt...." (Guerard, pp.114-15)

Marlow undertakes the journey from the civilized world to the savage centre of the jungle in Africa, from the world of light to that of darkness. First of all, he reaches the sea-board station of his trading company where he comes into his first contact with darkness which is the reality. His second contact with darkness is at the central station. On his arrival at the Inner Station, when he meets Kurtz he sees the reality of existence. He comes to know the futility and falsehood of human existence and endeavor. The civilized world from where

Marlow started represents the conscious level of human mind and Congo represents the unconscious. So, Marlow journeys from Ego to Id, from Conscious to Unconscious and the various stations are the stages that the mind has to pass through in its' journey into its' dark recesses. Ego is the superficial mask that we present to the world and Id is the reality that lies behind. Darkness pervades the continent of Id. Congo represents this darkness, this reality, the essence of whose realization lies in the last words of Kurtz. They define "the only sense of himself that man can bring back from a wholly inward journey: that into the immense darkness, the unmeaning anarchy, of his own psyche." (Stewart, p.84) The novel is also a journey into the heart of Kurtz who at the savage centre of the jungle, sees into the darkness of himself and is horrified. He himself becomes the heart of darkness.

In the process of the journey, Marlow discovers himself as well. He finds the dark caverns of his own heart. He breaks the shell of civilization and gets a peep into truth stripped of its' cloak of time. Thus both Kurtz and Marlow experience this encounter with darkness which is the reality: "It is not through the Dark night of the soul that Marlow and Kurtz pass, but they descend into the abyss of savagery – Kurtz directly and Marlow vicariously. The irrational that lies at such an abyss of every thought, sentiment, sensation and emotion is the central darkness in the heart of every man." (Inamdar, pp. 63-4)) The only difference is that Kurtz breaks himself off completely from civilization and becomes one with darkness. He takes the fatal leap over the edge of the precipice, never to come back. Marlow gets only a peep at the darkness, understands it and returns to civilization. Thus, we see that Conrad works out the theme of darkness deftly and arrives at universal truths about human existence. Darkness seen at physical, moral, political and psychological levels make us understand that the ultimate reality of human existence is death and darkness.

## REFERENCES

1. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Great Britain: Penguin. 1973).
2. (All subsequent references are from this text and page numbers are given in brackets after the quotations.)
3. F.A.Inamdar, *Image and Symbol in Joseph Conrad's Novels* (Jaipur: Panchsheel Prakashan, 1979)
4. Albert J. Guerard, "The Journey Within", *Modern British Fiction*, ed. Mark Schorer (New York: OUP, n.d.). J.I.M. Stewart, *Joseph Conrad*, (London: Longman, 1968).