



Theme of Racism in Heart of Darkness

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Abstract: *The study explores the pervasive theme of racism in Joseph Conrad's seminal novella, "Heart of Darkness." Through a comprehensive analysis of the text, the study aims to shed light on the various manifestations of racism in the narrative and the ways in which it shapes the characters, plot, and overall message of the work. The paper explores the historical context, the portrayal of African characters, and the symbolism employed by Conrad to unveil the deep-seated prejudices of the colonial era. By examining the complex layers of racism in "Heart of Darkness," the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the novella's socio-cultural significance.*

Keywords: *Racism, Colonialism, Euro Centrism, Dehumanization, Racial Prejudice.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad's novella, "Heart of Darkness," stands as a literary masterpiece that transcends the boundaries of time and place. Set against the backdrop of the late 19th-century European colonialism in Africa, it weaves a complex narrative that explores themes of human nature, morality, and the consequences of unchecked power. At its core, "Heart of Darkness" serves as a poignant and unflinching critique of racism, offering a searing examination of the pervasive racial prejudices that tainted the era of imperial expansion.

As readers journey into the heart of this enigmatic work, they are confronted not only with the darkness of an uncharted African wilderness but also with the darkness that resides within the hearts of its European characters. The novella peels back the layers of colonialism to reveal the insidious nature of racism that fueled the imperialist project. It delves into the dehumanization of African peoples, the Eurocentric worldviews that justified exploitation, and the moral decay that accompanied unchecked power.

In this exploration of the theme of racism in "Heart of Darkness," we embark on a journey of our own, one that leads us to grapple with the haunting legacy of colonial racism and its enduring relevance in contemporary discussions on racial prejudice, social justice, and the ongoing quest for a more equitable world. This study seeks to dissect the intricacies of racism



within the novella, uncovering the layers of symbolism, character interactions, and historical context that illuminate the pervasive nature of this dark theme. Through our analysis, we will come to understand how "Heart of Darkness" not only serves as a mirror reflecting the past but also as a catalyst for introspection and change in the present.

Objectives

The main objective of this research is to critically analyze racism in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" by identifying and examining instances of racism in character interactions, narrative elements, and symbolism. Additionally, it aims to investigate the historical context's impact on racism portrayal, explore how racism influences characters' motivations, and discuss broader implications related to contemporary discussions on colonialism, imperialism, and racial prejudice. Ultimately, the study contributes to ongoing discourse on the novella's literary and social significance.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for studying the theme of racism in "Heart of Darkness" involves a textual analysis approach. This method includes close reading of the novella, identifying instances of racism through character interactions, narrative elements, and symbolism. Additionally, historical context research is conducted to understand the era's racial biases and their impact on the narrative. The analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of racism in the novella and its broader implications for contemporary discussions on colonialism and racial prejudice.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Conrad's Narrative and Colonial-Era Racial Prejudices

Conrad's narrative in "Heart of Darkness" adeptly portrays and reinforces the prevalent racial prejudices of the colonial era through various literary and narrative techniques. One of the most notable methods he employs is the dehumanization of African characters within the story. Throughout the novella, these characters are consistently depicted as nameless and faceless entities, relegated to mere shadows or objects, thus stripping them of their individuality and agency, a portrayal that sustains the colonial notion of African inferiority and expendability. Moreover, the narrative itself is presented from a distinctly Eurocentric perspective, where European characters perceive the African landscape and its inhabitants through a lens of inherent superiority, reinforcing the notion that Europeans are innately more civilized and advanced, while Africans are exotic and primitive. This Eurocentric perspective is compounded by the lack of meaningful communication between European characters and Africans, further contributing to the reinforcement of racial prejudices. The Africans are depicted as unintelligible or incomprehensible, emphasizing a cultural and linguistic divide that further devalues their humanity. Conrad employs stereotypes and caricatures to represent African characters. For example, the character of the African helmsman is described in exaggerated, grotesque terms, perpetuating racial stereotypes prevalent in the colonial mindset. These stereotypes serve to justify the mistreatment and exploitation of Africans.



The narrative depicts the European characters' exploitation of Africa and its resources without regard for the well-being of the indigenous population. This economic exploitation is a reflection of the real colonial practices of the time, where European powers extracted wealth from African colonies with little concern for the local populations. The character of Kurtz, who descends into madness and brutality in the African wilderness, is a symbol of the corrupting influence of colonialism. His transformation suggests that the environment and the people of Africa are inherently corrupting; reinforcing the idea of African inferiority. Conrad uses symbolic elements such as darkness and light to reinforce racial prejudices. Darkness is often associated with Africa and its people, while light is associated with Europe. This symbolism reinforces the notion of Africa as a place of darkness and savagery.

Conrad's narrative in "Heart of Darkness" reinforces racial prejudices by portraying Africans as inferior, exotic, and dehumanized, while presenting European characters as superior and civilized. Through the use of language, symbolism, and characterizations, the novella reflects and perpetuates the racial biases that were prevalent during the colonial era. It serves as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of imperialism while simultaneously embodying the very prejudices it critiques, making it a complex and controversial work in the context of colonial literature.

3.2 Racism's Impact on African Characters' Roles and Identities in the Novella

Racism in the novella leads to the dehumanization and objectification of African characters. They are often treated as commodities, tools for the European characters' exploitation and advancement. This dehumanization is evident in the way they are described as "savages" and "shadows" rather than as individuals with their own thoughts, emotions, and agency. African characters in the story have limited agency and are largely powerless in the face of European colonialism. They are subjected to the whims and brutality of the European colonizers, with no voice or representation in the decisions that affect their lives and land. This lack of agency reflects the broader historical reality of colonial oppression. African characters are victims of economic exploitation. They are forced to work in harsh conditions, harvesting ivory for the European company, and their labor is exploited for profit. This economic exploitation reflects the real-world consequences of colonialism, where indigenous populations were often subjected to forced labor and resource extraction for the benefit of colonial powers. Racism contributes to the violence and brutality inflicted upon African characters. They are subjected to physical and psychological abuse by the European characters, who view them as expendable and inherently inferior. This violence is a manifestation of the racial prejudices held by the European colonizers.

African cultures and traditions are suppressed and erased in the face of European colonialism. The European characters impose their own beliefs and customs, erasing the cultural identities of the African characters. This cultural suppression is a reflection of the cultural imperialism that often accompanied colonialism. African characters, such as the helmsman and the native Africans encountered along the journey, are often used symbolically to represent the corrupting influence of colonialism. They serve as cautionary figures, suggesting that exposure to the European colonial project leads to moral and psychological degradation.



African characters are marginalized in the narrative, with their stories and perspectives largely ignored. The focus of the narrative is on the European characters, particularly Marlow and Kurtz, while the African characters remain on the periphery, reinforcing their status as secondary and insignificant.

In "Heart of Darkness," racism shapes the roles and identities of African characters by casting them as victims of dehumanization, exploitation, and violence. Their lack of agency and the suppression of their culture highlight the devastating consequences of racial prejudice and colonialism. Through these depictions, the novella raises important questions about the ethical and moral implications of imperialism and racism, making it a powerful and thought-provoking work of literature.

3.3 Conrad's Symbols and Metaphors

Joseph Conrad employs a range of symbols and metaphors in "Heart of Darkness" to powerfully contribute to the theme of racism and colonial exploitation. These literary devices help convey the deeper meanings and complexities of these themes.

The contrast between darkness and light is a central metaphor in the novella. Darkness often symbolizes the unknown, the mysterious, and the "savage" aspects of Africa in the eyes of the European colonizers. This metaphor reinforces the racist notion that Africa is a place of moral and intellectual darkness, perpetuating stereotypes about its inhabitants. The pervasive darkness suggests the European fear of the unfamiliar and their tendency to label it as inferior. The Congo River is both a physical and symbolic representation of the journey into the heart of Africa and the darkness of colonial exploitation. As the characters travel deeper into the interior, the river becomes increasingly treacherous and impenetrable, reflecting the moral descent and the corrupting influence of colonialism. The river is a metaphor for the destructive consequences of European imperialism on both the land and its people

Ivory, the sought-after resource in the novella, symbolizes the economic greed driving colonial exploitation. The quest for ivory represents the ruthless pursuit of profit at the expense of African lives and resources. The Europeans' obsession with ivory reflects the dehumanizing aspect of colonialism, where Africans are reduced to mere tools for wealth extraction. The Pilgrims, European agents of the Company, are depicted as blind followers who march in lockstep with no understanding of their actions. They represent the mindless conformity and complicity of those involved in colonial exploitation. Conrad uses this symbol to critique the moral blindness and apathy that can accompany imperialism.

Kurtz's Inner Station, where he accumulates ivory and becomes consumed by madness, symbolizes the ultimate destination of unchecked colonial greed and racism. It is a place of moral decay and brutality, where Kurtz has fully embraced the darkness within himself. This symbolizes the corrupting power of colonialism and the extent to which it dehumanizes both the colonizers and the colonized. The recurring fog along the Congo River serves as a metaphor for the moral ambiguity and confusion surrounding colonialism. It represents the blurred lines between right and wrong, civilization and savagery, as perceived by the European characters. This ambiguity allows racism to thrive, as it provides a convenient



rationalization for their actions.

The character of the African helmsman, who is skilled and knowledgeable about navigating the river, serves as a metaphor for the untapped potential of Africa and its people. His tragic fate at the hands of the Europeans highlights the wasteful and destructive nature of racism and colonial exploitation. These symbols and metaphors in "Heart of Darkness" enrich the narrative and contribute to the exploration of racism and colonial exploitation by providing layers of meaning and commentary on the moral and psychological consequences of imperialism. They serve as powerful literary tools to convey the complexities and dark realities of the colonial era, making the novella a compelling critique of these themes.

3.4 Critique of European Imperialism and its Inherent Racism

"Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad can be seen as a profound critique of European imperialism and its inherent racism. The novella offers a scathing examination of the moral and psychological consequences of colonialism, and it challenges the prevailing notions of European superiority and the justifiability of imperialist endeavors. The novella starkly illustrates the dehumanization of African people by European colonizers. African characters are depicted as nameless and faceless, reduced to stereotypes and treated as expendable labor. This dehumanization serves to critique the racist attitudes that underpinned colonialism, portraying Africans as victims of European brutality.

Kurtz, a central character, embodies the moral decay that can result from unchecked imperialism. He starts as an idealistic European agent but descends into madness and brutality in the African wilderness. His transformation underscores how colonialism can corrupt even the most well-intentioned individuals, exposing the moral bankruptcy at the heart of imperialism. The relentless pursuit of ivory, representing economic exploitation, is a central theme. It symbolizes the greed that fueled colonial endeavors. The European characters' obsession with profit at the expense of African lives highlights the moral bankruptcy of imperialism and its disregard for human dignity. The physical and metaphorical journey up the Congo River serves as a narrative vehicle for exploring the darkness and moral degradation of colonialism. As Marlow travels deeper into Africa, the landscape becomes increasingly hostile and symbolic of the destructive nature of imperialism. The river journey is a critique of the relentless drive for conquest.

Throughout the novella, the European characters display an arrogant sense of superiority over Africans. They view themselves as inherently civilized and the Africans as inherently savage. This arrogance is critiqued through the characters' actions and attitudes, revealing the hypocrisy and ignorance of imperialist ideology.

Marlow, the narrator, provides a critical perspective on the European imperial project. While he participates in it, he also offers insightful commentary on the moral ambiguity and darkness he witnesses. His narrative voice challenges the reader to question the ethics of colonialism. The novella highlights the erasure of African cultures and traditions in the face of European colonialism. This cultural suppression is a powerful critique of the destructive impact of imperialism on indigenous societies.



"Heart of Darkness" can be seen as a potent critique of European imperialism and its inherent racism. Through its vivid characters, symbols, and narrative, the novella exposes the dehumanization, moral corruption, and greed at the core of colonialism. It challenges the Eurocentric worldview and invites readers to confront the moral complexities and atrocities associated with imperialist endeavors. Consequently, "Heart of Darkness" remains a thought-provoking and enduring work that continues to spark discussions about the dark legacy of European colonialism and racism.

3.5 Ongoing Discussions on Racial Prejudice and Colonialism

Studying racism in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" holds significant contemporary implications and relevance to ongoing discussions on racial prejudice and colonialism. Here's how the exploration of this theme in the novella connects to current conversations and issues:

Understanding Historical Roots:

"Heart of Darkness" offers a window into the historical roots of racial prejudice and colonialism. By examining the novella, contemporary readers can gain insight into the deep-seated biases and attitudes that shaped colonial-era interactions between Europeans and Africans. Understanding these historical foundations is essential for addressing present-day racial inequalities and injustices.

Challenging Euro centrism:

The novella critiques the Eurocentric worldview that underpinned colonialism, highlighting the arrogance and ignorance of European characters. In contemporary discussions on cultural diversity and inclusivity, this critique serves as a reminder of the need to challenge and dismantle Euro centrism in various spheres, from literature to education and beyond.

Questioning Imperialist Legacies:

"Heart of Darkness" prompts readers to question the legacies of imperialism and its impact on colonized regions. In the modern world, many former colonies continue to grapple with the consequences of colonialism, including economic disparities, political instability, and cultural identity struggles. The novella's examination of the destructive aspects of imperialism resonates with ongoing efforts to address these legacies.

Examining Contemporary Racism:

The portrayal of racism in "Heart of Darkness" can be seen as a reflection of enduring racial prejudices. Contemporary discussions on systemic racism, racial profiling, and racial disparities draw parallels to the discriminatory attitudes and actions depicted in the novella. Studying these parallels can help raise awareness and drive efforts to combat racism in all its forms.

Moral Reflection:

The novella's exploration of moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas in the context of colonialism invites contemporary readers to engage in moral reflection. It prompts questions about complicity, responsibility, and accountability in the face of injustice. These questions



have direct relevance to contemporary discussions on social justice and human rights.

Cultural Sensitivity:

"Heart of Darkness" underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and respect for diverse perspectives. In today's globalized world, cultural awareness and the ability to navigate intercultural interactions are crucial. The novella serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of cultural insensitivity and ethnocentrism.

Education and Critical Thinking:

The study of "Heart of Darkness" encourages critical thinking and analysis. It challenges readers to examine the text's layers of meaning and symbolism, fostering skills that are valuable in analyzing complex contemporary issues, including those related to race and colonialism.

Studying racism in "Heart of Darkness" provides a bridge between the historical context of colonialism and ongoing discussions on racial prejudice, systemic racism, and cultural diversity. It serves as a relevant and thought-provoking text that prompts readers to consider the enduring impact of colonialism and the importance of addressing racial inequalities and biases in the present day. By engaging with this classic work, individuals and societies can continue to grapple with the complex legacies of imperialism and work toward a more equitable and inclusive future.

Discourse on the Literary and Social Significance of the Novella.

"Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad holds a prominent place in the literary canon and continues to be a focal point in discussions of its literary and social significance.

Exploration of the Human Condition: "Heart of Darkness" delves into the depths of human nature and the human condition. It raises questions about morality, the corrupting influence of power, and the capacity for evil within us all. This exploration of the human psyche resonates with contemporary discussions on ethics, personal responsibility, and the complexities of human behavior.

Critique of Imperialism: The novella remains a potent critique of European imperialism and its devastating effects on colonized peoples. In an era where post-colonialism, neocolonialism, and discussions about reparations are relevant, "Heart of Darkness" provides a lens through which to examine the historical injustices and their contemporary consequences.

Examination of Racism: The novella's portrayal of racism remains relevant in discussions about systemic racism, racial prejudice, and social justice. It prompts reflection on how racial biases persist and continue to shape societies, institutions, and interpersonal relationships.

Study of Narrative Perspective: "Heart of Darkness" challenges traditional narrative perspectives and offers a narrative framed within a narrative. This narrative complexity



encourages contemporary readers to consider the subjectivity of storytelling and the power dynamics involved in shaping historical narratives.

Use of Symbolism and Allegory: The novella's rich use of symbolism and allegory continues to inspire discussions about the role of symbolism in literature and how it can convey complex themes and ideas. It encourages readers to examine the deeper layers of meaning in texts and to appreciate the artistry of allegorical storytelling.

Influence on Literature: "Heart of Darkness" has had a profound influence on subsequent literature and has been referenced, adapted, and critiqued by numerous authors and scholars. Its impact on the development of modernist literature and its enduring presence in the literary landscape make it a significant touchstone for discussions on literary history and influence.

Cultural Sensitivity: "Heart of Darkness" serves as a reminder of the importance of cultural sensitivity and the need to critically examine representations of diverse cultures in literature and media. It prompts discussions about cultural appropriation and the responsibilities of authors and creators in portraying other cultures.

Psychological Exploration: The novella's exploration of psychological themes, particularly the descent into madness, remains a subject of interest in discussions about mental health, trauma, and the psychological toll of historical and contemporary events.

"Heart of Darkness" continues to contribute to ongoing discourse in both literary and social contexts by addressing timeless themes and sparking critical conversations about imperialism, racism, morality, narrative perspective, symbolism, and ethics. Its enduring relevance and ability to provoke thoughtful reflection make it a literary work of enduring significance in the modern world.

Implications of the Study

The implications of the study on racism in "Heart of Darkness" extend to a deeper understanding of how literature reflects and critiques historical prejudices. It also highlights the ongoing relevance of addressing racial bias and colonial legacies in contemporary society. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of critical analysis and reflection in combating racism and promoting social justice.

4. CONCLUSION

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" serves as a stark portrayal of the pervasive and insidious nature of racism during the colonial era. Throughout the novella, Conrad illuminates how racism was deeply embedded in the mindset of the European colonizers, affecting their perceptions, actions, and moral compass. The dehumanization of African characters, the Eurocentric perspective, and the symbolic use of darkness and light collectively reveal the extent to which racism colored every facet of colonial interactions. Conrad's narrative effectively underscores how racism was not merely an incidental aspect of imperialism but an integral and defining element that shaped the colonial experience. The exploration of racism



in "Heart of Darkness" extends its relevance far beyond its historical context. Today, as societies grapple with ongoing discussions about racial prejudice, systemic racism, and the legacy of colonialism, the novella continues to serve as a critical touchstone. It prompts us to confront uncomfortable truths about the persistence of racial biases and inequalities in our modern world. The moral dilemmas faced by characters like Marlow and the moral decay of Kurtz offer profound reflections on individual and collective responsibility, highlighting that the legacy of colonial racism is still present in our contemporary social and political structures.

"Heart of Darkness" invites readers to reflect not only on the historical injustices of colonialism but also on the enduring consequences of racism. It challenges us to confront the racial prejudices that persist in society, institutions, and interpersonal relationships. The novella calls for change, for a critical reevaluation of our attitudes and behaviors, and for a commitment to dismantling systemic racism. As we continue to grapple with the complexities of racial prejudice and colonial legacies, "Heart of Darkness" remains an essential literary work that compels us to acknowledge the past, engage in critical self-examination, and work toward a more just and equitable future.

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