

Heart of darkness

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

My purpose in this article is to evaluate the roles played by the women characters in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, and to show, contrary to the general view, that the women in the novel may and do serve to give more meaning to the text than they are supposed to do. I have taken into the purview of my critical analysis only three of the women-Marlow's old aunt, Kurtz's Intended, and his African Mistress.

I have kept the two receptionists in the Company's office in Brussels aside, primarily because the "Two women, one fat and the other slim,(who) sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool" (Conrad 31) are mostly symbolic abstractions and have very little to add to the probable total meanings of the novel. The 'compassionate secretary' who made Marlow sign some documents in the Brussels office and who may possibly be a woman is also not considered on the same ground. There is a general critical consensus that the world of Joseph Conrad's fictions is basically a male-dominated world.

The colonial adventures, imperial businesses, hazardous navigations, startling explorations and such other activities and experiences which usually construct the plots of most of the novels and short stories of Conrad were, in fact, the concerns of men, not of women, in the late Victorian society. The Victorian women were happy with their immediate domestic-social realities, and had only vague and idealistically formed views about the larger external issues such as colonial-imperial activities.

Therefore, in Conrad's novels the women characters are fewer in number and are almost nowhere found to occupy the centrestage, controlling or shaping the plot. They are made to appear at the peripheries and are

allowed to play only secondary roles. They are never found to either be equal to or at least very close to the important positions given to their male counterparts. Heart of Darkness is, by no means, any exception to this fact about the position of the female characters in Conrad.

Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies in her introduction to the Oxford edition of Conrad's Heart of Darkness observes : Women, to begin with, are hard to come by at the centre of this male colonial enterprise. Even at the peripheries where they roam, the roles they are given are problematic. Not only are Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's African woman and his Intended ultimately powerless in the colonial exercise that the men carry out, they are satirized by the colonial male for misguided perceptions of 'the idea'. (Bose 14) Such a view of the women in Heart of Darkness is not at all rare.

Most other critics are of the view that Conrad has given only pyrrhic and peripheral roles to his female characters in Heart of Darkness . In fact, it is assumed that Conrad had a great weakness in depicting women in a convincing manner. We may refer to the words of P. O'Prey in his 'Introduction' to Heart of Darkness : Heart of Darkness ... avoids what is Conrad's greatest fault, his inability to create convincing women characters, by keeping its only two women (Conrad's aunt and Kurtz's 'Intended') in the background. (O'Prey 22) Conrad's youth was spent on the seas and oceans, away from the sophisticated English society.

Again, as one born in Poland, he had no earlier idea of the British society. Hence it would have been impossible for him to write on the social themes or problems of the Victorian England. And he never, quite judiciously,
<https://assignbuster.com/heart-of-darkness/>

attempted to do it. He has discarded the Victorian social realism, and turned his eyes to colonial-imperial exercises which he watched and scanned from a very close quarter. And he has adopted a symbolic-impressionisticcritical mode of narration to explore the inner realities of the world he presents in his novels.

Heart of Darkness is a novel of this category, and therefore the women characters in the novel are so sketchy and apparently under-developed. In the novel itself the novelist makes his spokesman Marlow say that the women hardly have any role to play in the colonial exercises. They are kept out of it. It is thus evident that in Heart of Darkness the absence of a fully developed woman character is not due to any fault on the part of Conrad such as his inability to build up one, but because the theme of Heart of Darkness can hardly allow any such character without the risk of making the whole novel unrealistic.

A woman character set at the centre of all imperialistic-colonial activities would only be unreal and therefore unconvincing. Thus if the women characters like the aunt and the Intended who really have no close association with the basic theme of the novel were given more space or attention, they would certainly have impressed us as superfluous and highly fictitious. Conrad had to keep them in low profiles to highlight the colonial exercises which form the main theme of the novel realistically.

But the three women characters in Heart of Darkness (Marlow's old aunt, Kurtz's Intended and his African Mistress) are not so simple or unimportant as they apparently seem to be. Conrad has no doubt placed them in the peripheries of the main activities in the novel because they are naturally

aloof from its central actions. Still, the characters are by no means ill-drawn or utterly peripheral.

By subtle suggestions, symbolic significances, and meaningful contrasts Conrad has made them impressive and unforgettable. What's more, they serve to give more meaning to the text and also help understanding or exploring the characters placed in the centre (i. e. Kurtz and Marlow). In the following section of this article, I will try to explain why or how these three women characters in the novel really deserve more critical attention than they are given so far.

This so called 'greatest fault' of Conrad, 'his inability to create convincing women characters', is perhaps a myth, not a reality. True, we hardly get any well drawn, fully developed, woman character in Conrad. The women characters are mostly sketchy, incomplete, and may even be sometimes called symbolic abstractions. But an absence of a fully developed woman character in Conrad's novels is not necessarily or convincingly a proof of his inability or failure to create such a character.

Had he ever attempted to create a woman character elaborately and then failed to make the character convincing to the readers, the question of failure might occur. But we cannot find fault with Conrad and criticise him for something which he never attempted to do. In fact, with Conrad's practice of fiction writing there is hardly any scope of creating a fully developed woman character. Unlike the Victorian novelists and most of the modern fiction writers, Conrad is concerned with themes and experiences of mostly an external, male dominated world. As a sailor, the prime time of Vol. -I Number

Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies 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. (Conrad 33-34) The three women characters in Heart of Darkness fall under two categories - the civilized Europeans and the savage African.

Thus the three characters are set to provide a sharp cultural contrast between the two continents so far as the feminine emotions, sentiments, and sexuality are concerned. Conrad himself has suggested an ironic contrast between the European and the African women by the painting of Kurtz which was left in the Central Station of the company. It was the picture of a "woman, draped and blind-folded carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre - almost black.

The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torch-light on the face was sinister" (Conrad 46-47). The picture is highly symbolic, and the symbolic significance of the picture has been beautifully analysed by a critic in the following terms: Europe, symbolized by the Intended, in Africa, symbolized by darkness--but, the torch will be quenched, the blind woman swallowed whole. Marlow did not really lie: the last words Kurtz pronounced were, in part, in reference to his symbolic model within his symbolic picture. Kimbrough 415) Conrad's presentation of the two European women as 'out of touch with truth' is brief but realistic. The aunt and the Intended, the old and the young, give us a perfect glimpse at the condition of the women in

the late Victorian England. They were ‘blessed’ with the joy of ignorance and were confined in the artificial world of their false ideas and ideals, without any knowledge of the realities of colonialism and rapid industrialization of the time.

The two women in the novel may thus be studied as representing the Victorian world of women as a foil to the world of men, that is the world of trade and commerce, of deception, hypocrisy and exploitation. One may wonder how Conrad allows only a little space to the women in the actual text, but leaves a huge space to derive meaning from. Marlow’s aunt who managed the job for him in the Belgian Limited Company for Trade in the Upper Congo, and that too within a very short time, represents great power, the power of the women over men.

She has no idea of the colonial rules, but she has an effective power over those who rule the colonies. Her role in the novel may otherwise be peripheral, but here in getting the job for Marlow she no doubt plays a pivotal role. Marlow recalls how “She was determined to make no end fuss to get me (Marlow) appointed skipper, of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy” (Conrad 29). Her success in managing the job for Marlow remains as a necessary precondition for what we get in the novel about colonial-imperial activities in Africa, and about the evil lurking deep in the mind of man. The women characters in the novel are all, quite meaningfully, made nameless. They are thus denied of their individual identities and made known only in terms of their relations or associations with some men, namely Marlow and Kurtz in the present context. Thus they are made peripheral, or minor

characters as the tale demands them to be. Conrad might also have desired his women characters Vol.

Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies to represent different classes of women, symbolically, instead of individuated beings. Nina Pelikan Straus observes : It is Conrad's text itself that stimulates the notion that the psychic penury of women is a necessary condition for the heroism of men, and whether or not Heart of Darkness is a critique of male heroism or is in complex complicity with it, gender dichotomy is an inescapable element of it. (Straus 179) can Marlow being a part of and also a party to that dark reality puncture the balloon of colonial idealism by revealing the truth?

Hence he had to lie to the Intended and say, " The last word he (Kurtz) pronounced was-your name". (Conrad 104) It is very important to note that Conrad does not end the novel immediately after Marlow's return from his voyage, but allows Marlow's narrative to be extended till his meeting with the Intended after a period of more than one year. Conrad's inclusion of the episode of Marlow's meeting with the Intended into the main design of the novel is suggestive of its indispensability as well as of the importance of the character of the intended in the novel.

The Intended, an otherwise marginalized character, here throws much light into the main theme of the novel. The hypocrisy associated essentially with colonial activities is exposed and emphasized further by the Intended. Ian Watt in his essay " Heart of Darkness and Nineteenth Century Thought" observes: ... Marlow at the end finds himself forced to lie to her about Kurtz.

One reason is that if he told the truth she would not have the necessary grounds in her own experience to be able to understand it; another is that since for all his seeking Marlow himself has found no faith which will move mountains, his nostalgia inclines him to cherish the faith that ignores them. (Watt 84) This observation of Straus may be studied meaningfully in connection with Conrad's presentation of Kurtz's Intended. The lady has been portrayed as one who is weak, mournful, and almost fragile in her grief for Kurtz. Marlow meets her after more than one year of Kurtz's death, but Kurtz's memory is still fresh in her mind. Marlow informs us that " she seemed as though she would remember and mourn for ever"(Conrad 101).

Marlow's presentation of the Intended only confirms what Nina Straus calls her ' psychic penury': She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering. The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. Their glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful. She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, I--I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves.