A Passage to India and Heart of Darkness: A Comparative Study of Anti-Colonialism

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Abstract:

World history is a chronicle of dominance of the powerful over the weak. History shows that the view of the weak is always shaped by the whim of the powerful: “Wherever our [colonized/weak] view of what we do, we are made by the forces of people moving about the world” (Boehmer 214). The two celebrated widely read literary masterpieces A Passage to India and Heart of Darkness by E. M. Forster and Joseph Conrad respectively offer us the opportunity to realize the pictures of brutality in India and in Congo. This study focuses on the points of comparison between the two texts from different perspectives and ends up with the assumption that corruptions that are done through whatever form(s) always infiltrate the ideology of both the white (Western) and the black (Eastern) ultimately resulting in guilt and destruction.

Rule and disparity of power and wealth are persistent components that change the path of human society towards unwanted platforms such as world war, civil war, cold war, etc. History of human civilization has shown the interrelation of terms like ruling, disparity, power and wealth. And the present contexts of postcolonial literature are entwined with these terms which analyze the lives of the colonized, their longing for independence, reasons of the failure of a decolonization trajectory, etc. This study is an attempt to understand such analyses. And it is done with the projections as found in E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India and Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. These texts are seminal sources to have a clinical look at colonial outrages that took place in Asia (India) and in Africa (Congo). The writers are different in their style (Forster’s novel; Conrad’s novella) and context (Forster deals with Asian natives of different classes, i. e. upper, middle, upper-middle, lower-middle, and lower classes, above all with the educated and uneducated; Conrad deals with African natives who are almost barbarians, uneducated), but they are same in one point that they are anti-colonial.

A Passage to India deals with British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent. The novel explores the dimensions of the colonizer-colonized relationship socially. The Bridge Party is the perfect example demonstrating the colonized-colonizer social relationship. The British are offering bridge party to show the wide gulf between East and West, as Mrs. Turton says, “I refuse to shake hands with any of the men” (Forster 41). On the other hand, Heart of Darkness deals with Africa, the Dark Continent (as the Western people coined it), especially with the Belgian invasion in Congo. It was published at the height of Britain’s second great push to expand its worldwide colonies, popularly known as the “New Imperialism.” One of the main targets of European colonial growth during this period was Africa. In Heart of Darkness, the merchants, the trading company, its officers and agents represent the colonial vision, exploring the dimensions of the colonial mercantilism and the evil it incorporates: acculturation, exploitation, white savagery, etc.

The British’s insatiability for geographical expansion and greed for wealth have corrupted the society and has caused inhuman exploitation. At the core of the civilizing mission the intention is economic benefit as Ania Loomba argues, “[i]n whichever direction human beings and materials travelled, the profits always flowed into the so called mother country” (02). Jean-Paul Sartre, in his “Preface” to The Colonizer and the Colonized confesses the same notion emphasizing the economic aspects of colonization: “For me the economic aspects of colonialism is fundamental,” and denunciates, “the so-called moral or cultural mission of colonization” which shows the profit motive as its basic. He further notes that “the deprivations of the colonized are almost direct result of the advantages secured to the colonizers” (Memmi XII). And that is why the colonizers do not want to be pleasant as in that case
their main motto of robbing the target country would be a meager dream, which is justified by Ronny when he says, “[w]e’re not pleasant in India, and we don’t want to be pleasant. We’ve something more important to do” (Forster 50). In the novella Heart of Darkness, Kurtz, the ivory agent, exploited the natives in Congo by cutting out the heads of the rebels and placing them onto a stick for failing to co-operate with him in his enterprise to become the white tycoon in the black tribal hinterland of the Congo River: “Financial interest, the British Liberal J. A. Hobson wrote at the start of the twentieth century, tended to govern the forces of colonial expansion, even where these were generated by groups with mixed motives, such as politicians of philanthropists” (Boehmer 36). So, the fundamental motive of colonialism is economic: to trade, to become a ruler from a trader, to fulfill the chief interest of gaining wealth, which is reflected in both the texts. In both texts, we see the colonizers are looking for profits and they had chosen India and Congo, because investment in the conquered areas is about nil and native labour is cheap. This situation is maintained in the colonized areas by depriving the colonized people of their political and economic rights.

The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as reflected in the texts affects the psychology of the colonized as well as of the colonizer. The Europeans assumed superiority over the colonized and was one of the most important justifications for the colonization of a country. But both the texts drastically undermine the assumption by stating it a false justification, which is evident in the ambivalence of the characters in the texts. The received cultural assumptions become more ingrained to some characters as E. M. Forster clearly shows in his representations of the members of the English Club in Chandrapore. Character like Kurtz is not able to resolve the contradictions and sink into madness in Heart of Darkness. This ambivalence gets deeper when characters (like Mrs. Moore) are found not to be able to recover from disillusion, and characters (like Miss Quested and Marlow) experience a psychological crisis with their new revelations in Other lands. The ambivalent state of mentality is traceable when Marlow is informed by the company Doctor about the Europeans’ behavior in the colonies before his leaving for Africa. The Doctor cynically informs about the changed psychological status of the people who walk off to the colonies: “the changes take place inside, you know.” Moreover, crossing the border of physical brutality, many of the European characters utter extreme repugnance for the natives, as the Company’s chief accountant shouts thus: “When one has to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to the death” (Conrad 38, 47). It is not unusual and that is why apart from Marlow no one else addresses such attitudes and questions such sentiments as unreasonable. Thus, we can surely say that the Europeans feel entitled to act cruelly and hate unreservedly.

Because of the colonial makeup, the British civil servant Ronny Heaslop warns his mother, Mrs. Moore, after her arrival in Chandrapore, that there is a palpable duality in the attitudes, sayings, and thoughts of a native. Hearing this Mrs. Moore replies, “Englishmen like posing as gods.” (Forster 33). To Mrs. Moore this way of British behavior is different because they do not follow such way in England and hearing this Ronny disregards and argues, “India isn’t home.” The people with authoritarian posts, like the Callenders and the Turtons, typify the superlative British approach and an example of such is when Mrs. Turton informs Mrs. Moore that they are superior to anyone in India. The authoritarian colonialists repeatedly presage Mrs. Moore, Miss Quested, and Mr. Fielding of the perils of any kind of interaction or relation with the natives in any format, i.e. social or personal as they state that any of such contact or relation may taint them badly. In Heart of Darkness, the concept is the same one; it is assumed that any European who is with bad attitudes must be related to the native in some ways.

The mental ambivalent state as investigated in both the texts is dissected in features by Albert Memmi in The Colonizer and the Colonized. He details that “to be a colonizer means to be a non-legitimate privileged person” for justifying the illegal trespass into legal. The colonizers do this in a way where they admire their values as of values of the zenith and “harp on the usurper’s demerits, so deep that they cannot help leading to misfortune” (Memmi 52-53). Consequently, the result is obvious, the more the colonizer tries to justify to his/her people and the natives of the evil of the colonized, the more s/he himself becomes a dictator. Such attitude is a must for the British because they need to justify their actions to the world and most importantly, to people at their own countries as well to hide their treacherous goal of gaining wealth for England at any cost, even at the cost of the lives of the natives. They do not want to take the risk of being questioned by anyone, because if anyone questions their hypothesis, it may be critical to their cultural and personal standings.

However, in both the texts there are characters who recognize the dichotomy between the truth and veracity of colonial life, and take the risk of changing their attitudes and thoughts towards more optimistic and constructive ways. Mrs. Moore, Miss Quested, and Marlow, all come to know of the cynicism behind the apparent ethical rationale of colonialism and at least strive to oppose such cynicism. Mrs. Moore, Ronny’s mother, is not that much successful in her attempt. The Marabar Caves experience directs her to lose faith in Christian sanguinity and cultural formation. She is, no one will deny surely, the prime humane character in the novel, and because of this ‘humane’ quality her disappointment with her personal mental constructs, which is entangled with the British culture,
tradition, and identity, put forward the general but the truth that the mistreatment inherent in the colonial system is fruitful neither for the British nor for the native Indians, and Britain is not on a noble, civilizing mission in India. But due to her age and weak health, she fails to cope with this psychological blow and dies.

The transformation that takes place with Miss Quested is not a drastic one as she is not disillusioned radically. We experience her transformation continues after her return to England. The experience she has undergone in the Caves can also be interpreted as an encounter with her subconscious mind in the form of the projected ‘Other,’ represented by Aziz, coloured by the ideological hypothesis of the British colonialist. The talks with Aziz while she is entering into a Cave are indicative of the anxiety about her upcoming marriage to Ronny, and in fact, she realizes that she does not love Ronny really. At that time, she is also thinking about the nature of marriage based on sexual compulsions. These disintegrated thoughts are in her mind when she enters into the Cave and perhaps the claustrophobic atmosphere inside it leads her to imagine a scenario with Aziz that does not really happen. But somehow, wrongly and mistakenly, she imagines that Aziz ill-treated her. This assumption or thought is not only fruitless neither for the British nor for the native Indians, and Britain is not on a noble, civilizing mission in India.

But due to her age and weak health, she fails to cope with this psychological blow and dies. “the darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not vice versa” (Forster 213). Adela is bound to believe due to her own anxieties regarding sex and marriage, but also takes place due to the European cultural supposition: the supposition, as she is overtly warned about the unreliability of the Indians by the colonialists, and as a consequence in a moment of heightened nervousness and bewilderment, projects her fear of sexual union and marriage by imagining that she must fight off Aziz. However, as the novel develops, she realizes her fault and not only rightly acquits Aziz, but also comes to her understanding that she does not want to marry Ronny. Her refusal to marry Ronny and her rejection of colonialism not because of a proper understanding of its imperfections but because she realizes it demeans and dehumanizes those who try to colonize and want to preserve it.

In Heart of Darkness, Marlow experiences a transformation alike Adela. His expedition up the river to the Central Station to meet Kurtz is a voyage to the decayed heart of colonialism. He retracts every belief of colonial philosophy, re-examines them in arguments with himself between the rhetoric of Europe’s “civilizing mission” and the actualities of viciousness and mistreatment. Within himself, he confesses to the apprehension that the Africans are not beasts but are just as human as he is, and the Europeans are not morally beyond the level of savagery that they claim of the Africans. He thinks and struggles with the disagreements between self-interested and merciless economic reasons and the ethics facade, and comes to understanding both the reality of colonialism and imperialism beyond the ideology and the corruption of the men who are involved in it, and identifies the problem in both cases as a lack of restraint. Kurtz becomes a brute as he ceases to exercise restraint and when Western civilization does not implement restraint, it steadily assaults and abuses other peoples and cultures. In order to come out of such situation, Marlow focuses at the need for a real faith unconnected to economic gain, and it is his sincere devout striving that really civilizes people. Marlow is not interested to deal with a person whose thoughts are entangled with economic benefit and thus outskirts the humanity, the human essence of oneself, as he says, “with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low...He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man!” (Conrad 65) It means, if someone is looking to civilize other s/he must be the same first, as Manganiello says: “Eliot underlines the need for a moral perspective without which human beings experience death in a spiritual no man’s land” (Dominie 60).

One of the reasons of clash between British-Asian and British-African is the ruler-subject relationship which is explored in both the texts through different agencies. Humanity of the native people is ignored, the feelings of the natives are overlooked and it seems that the colonizers cross the sense of humanity to that extent that they can be called uncivilized, e. g. telling lies about the natives, hurting them physically, looking upon them as lower class. Above all, the colonizers disregard the values and passion of a human being. In A Passage to India, the Indo-European relationship is tested through the discourse of Dr. Aziz’s attempt to rape an English lady. Taking the benefit of the situation, the English manipulate the event for their interests ignoring the urge of humanity. They are always ready to seize advantage from a discourse:

Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guiles and diseases, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality, both institutionally…and informally. Colonialism, (like its counterpart racism), then, is a formation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation. (Tiffin and Lawson, quoted in Loomba 95)

Hence, in A Passage to India, Adela is the female dupe to test the elasticity of Indo-British colonial relationship. In Heart of Darkness, we understand this relationship through the colonizers’ attempt to collect the ivory. In the latter novel, ivory is the natural agent to test the facade of European civilization and enlightenment.

Another important point of consideration of the two texts is resistance. In A Passage to India the suppressed natives, like Hamidullah, know that they are suppressed by the British people. We see Hamidullah inquires confidently and fearlessly about an Englishman’s (Fielding’s) reaction towards his assessment of British
suppression. He asks thus: “Excuse the question, but if this is the case, how is England justified in holding India? … is it fair an Englishman should occupy one when Indians are available?” (Forster 108) In Heart of Darkness the suppressed natives do not know that they are suppressed by the Belgians. They appear before us without voice, with an image solely: “there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling” (Conrad 68).

The ending of these two seminal literary creations are emphatically different although both the texts are showing the effects of colonialism and imperialism. Forster’s humanism fails to synthesize colonialism and postcolonialism and leaves the matter undecided. At the end of the novel, we see Aziz and Fielding, who seem to be very good friends, end their last meeting with a note of separation. In reply of Fielding’s friendship Aziz, echoing Kipling’s sayings ‘the twin shall never meet,’ says that East and West cannot be bridged. Conrad’s Kurtz dies enacting horror and witnessing horror of life and death. An evil incarnate, he opens up the hollowness of colonialism via mercantilism and its consequent tragedy.

Considering both Forster’s and Conrad’s projections in the texts, it can be concluded that in a cultural identity one’s belief is a part of that identity which shapes one’s thoughts and intuitions of the world around. Sometimes, specifically when people are in intense moments, when their suppositions oppose, they become cognizant of themselves, and sometimes, like Marlow and Miss Quested, realize that these suppositions are wrong. Both Conrad and Forster demonstrate that when unfairness is perpetrated to a great scale, everyone is affected, and as a consequence everyone is guilty. There are many like Chinua Achebe who condemned Conrad as a “thoroughgoing racist.” In his “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness,” Achebe severely attacks Conrad and asserts:

> It is not Conrad’s purpose to confer language on the ‘rudimentary souls’ of Africa. In place of speech they made ‘a violent babble of uncouth sounds.’ They ‘exchanged short grunting phrases’ even among themselves. But most of the times they were too busy with their frenzy. (255)

However, this serious charge is countered by Hunt Hawkins in a convincing way who finds Marlow “essentially sympathetic to Africans.” Hawkins says:

> In Heart of Darkness Marlow is essentially sympathetic to Africans…He does not view them as noble, but he finds that, in comparison with the fiendishness of Kurtz, their ‘pure, uncompromising savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine.’ He sees them as ‘prehistoric’ but he recognizes ‘their humanity—like yours.’ Marlow is sufficiently sensitive to their culture to realize that in Africa drums might have ‘as profound meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country.” (296)

We, however, think it would be harsh to condemn Conrad by taking him as a colonialist. Because of the many facets of colonialism, a writer’s writing can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. After reading A Passage to India we get the anti-colonial message immediately (through Aziz—a non-white); while the same message is conveyed in Heart of Darkness, but from a different perspective (through Marlow—a white). So, although there are differences in the writers’ efforts to touch the readers’ consciousness from different perspectives, both Forster and Conrad are anti-colonial and anti-imperialist in attitude as both the works exemplify the condemnation of colonialism.

**Works Cited**


