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Comparative Analysis of Colonialism and Identity in "Heart of Darkness" and "The Book of Secrets"

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Abstract

This paper examines the themes of colonialism and identity in M.G. Vassanji's "The Book of Secrets" and Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness". Its purpose is to demonstrate through close readings of these novels how the portrayal of colonial power dynamics and their respective effect on personal and communal identities within both the colonised and postcolonial are laid bare through narrative craft and historical context. Through Marlow's journey in the Congo, "Heart of Darkness" shows what European imperialism in Africa was like, showing the negative impacts it had on the oppressors and the oppressed. Conrad's use of the character Kurtz helps him to show how dark human nature can be and what the consequences are of letting one's own identity be used as a tool for exploitation by imperialists. Conversely, "The Book of Secrets" is a complicated study of colonial encounters in East Africa which fuses stories from various generations, it examines how colonialism influenced our way of understanding ourselves. Vassanji's storytelling art makes difficult concepts like hybridity between cultures and historical scars look simpler in understanding why a generation born after independence still lives under the shadow of its former colonizers today. The diary as well as people such as Pius Fernandes are used to demonstrate how memory relates to self-identity that comes after colonization. Through postcolonial theory and literary criticism, the aim here is to expand our understanding of literature concerned with colonialism and identity. This research seeks to demonstrate universal ideas concerning power, agency, and resistance embedded in both pre-colonial and post-colonial stories. Hence, this study adds to

ongoing discussions about the long-term effects of imperialism also taking into account globalization complexities regarding constructing identities today.

Keywords: Colonialism, Identity Crisis, Narrative techniques, Character development

Introduction

Many literary works have been concerned with the idea of colonialism and its deep-felt effects on individuals and societies. In this research, I will explore how Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and M.G. Vassanji's "The Book of Secrets" present colonialism and identity. Conrad's story which occurs in Africa Congo is a critique of Europe's colonizing the continent as being cruel and dehumanizing. On the other hand, Vassanji while making his book set in East Africa presents the British imperialist experience critically through a lens that recognizes its impact on individual identities and communities. This paper aims to compare authors' treatment of complex issues related to colonization rule vis-à-vis personal or collective identities. "Heart of Darkness" explores moral corruption in the psyche of European colonizers while "The Book of Secrets" focuses on the historical ramifications of colonisation for colonized people like the Indian diaspora in East Africa. The aim is to extend this comprehension by investigating likenesses as well as differences between these presentations about colonialism to make contributions towards a broader understanding of colonial literature today when it is considered alongside contemporary discourses about identity, and power dynamics among others... The criticism of colonialism in the field of literary criticism is not of recent vintage, and postcolonial literature has of course as its axis the challenge to the colonial movement. In the centuries since its invention, praise and damnation have come to every part of "Heart of Darkness" when it comes to its portrayal of Africa and the critique of imperial conquest, and oh so much has been written about it. The essay "An Image of Africa" is a postcolonial reading of the novella accusing it of racism against Africans: as dehumanising, as the work of an author under the influence of the mind of his age, and simply as foolish insult to a continent, seen "as the other world", unable to tell its own stories of the real Chinua Achebe. Edward Said writes in Culture and Imperialism that Conrad is in the Empire as he speaks against the barbarism of imperialism. M.G. Vassanji's "The Book of Secrets" has been praised for its East African colonial history and the Indian diaspora. Scholars have examined how the book represents the cultural and social dynamics of British Colonialism especially on race, class and identity. Its structure – personal histories intersecting with

historical events – has been praised for its exploration of memory and identity. And interestingly Brenda Cooper in her book *M.G. Vassanji: Essays on His Works* says Vassanji navigates post-colonial identities and colonial legacies. But we need a comparison of these two works. How do different historical and geographical contexts shape colonialism and identity? This paper will fill that gap by comparing in detail how Conrad and Vassanji treat colonialism and identity.

Historical Context

Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is a critique of European imperialist venture into Africa in the late 19th century. It is set when Belgian Congo was known for being exploited brutally by King Leopold II. Here, Conrad paints a bleak image of colonialism using his experiences as a captain on a steamer plying the Congo River. Forced labour, violence and inhuman conditions were common features of Belgian Congo characterized by intense exploitation of both land and indigenous people. This is what makes Conrad's characterizations historically accurate since they capture the true nature of atrocities perpetrated during this era. Conrad shows the moral emptiness, human insanity and lack of purpose in European imperialism via Marlow's observations and experiences. The novel presents Congo as 'the heart of darkness' metaphorically, illustrating the rotteness attached to colonialism. Kurtz who represents individuals that become ferocious and crazy is used by Marlow to demonstrate how human beings can be harsh, greedy and exploitative while seeking authority. The description of the white man's character with African natives reveals inherent contradictory features displayed by people when under different circumstances. This is evident, especially during their interaction with one another where multiple meanings can be derived from what they say or do not say. In his storytelling, Conrad challenges his audience to consider what it means to be human against a backdrop shaped by colonialism. The novella poses great thoughts on what morals are, what makes a person civilized, and what is the human being about which asks the readers to think over ethical concerns caused by imperialism and the European dominance legacy in Africa. The historical context of "The Heart of Darkness" continues to ring true today in discussions of colonialism, imperialism and European expansionism. Conrad's novella remains a scathing critique of the dehumanizing effects brought by colonialism as well as an introspection into man's dark side and individual existential crises within oppressive violent systems.

“The Book of Secrets,” on the other hand, takes place in East Africa, mostly during the British colonization period between the early to mid-20th century according to Vassanji. The novel is set over multiple decades, including major historical events such as the First World War and the Mau Mau Uprising, which are used to demonstrate how British colonialism was broad-based and enduring. But British imperialism mainly justified itself by saying it brought “progress” and “civilisation”, unlike the Belgian Congo. However, this was often a front for resource extraction and political domination. The novel contemplates how these policies affected local populations through examples of Indians from East Africa who had to negotiate intricate socio-political terrains. Colonialism plays an ever-echoing influence on the characters of such culturally variant backgrounds throughout the architecture. Whether they come from the Indian indentured labourers shipped to East Africa by the British, or the African communities displaced by colonial policies, the characters in "The Book of Secrets" are wrestling with the enduring features of empire - economic exploitation, cultural dilution, political banishment. The book also explores what East African communities went through in both World War I and World War II when the area then a playing field among competing colonial powers. Narrated through the lives of soldiers recruited in Africa to fight on the battlefields of Europe and Asia, and the socio-economic disruptions undergone by the subject populations due to wartime mobilization, Vassanji offers up a trenchant portrayal of the tumult in East Africa wrought by war and the lasting scars it has left. In the novel, Vassanji uses and interconnects many narratives, historical, cultural and individual to provide a broad picture of East Africa both in the past and at present. Set in colonial times and moving to the post-colonial phase, ‘The Book of Secrets’ is a historical narrative that poses the questions of history, memory and identity in a region influenced by the impact of imperialism and diaspora.

Depiction of Colonialism

‘Heart of Darkness’ shows colonialism as a profoundly ruinous power. The European colonists, such as Kurtz, are depicted as being corrupt and hypocritical. Although Kurtz arrives in Africa with great ideals, he is swayed by the abuse of power and exploitation, ultimately turning into a tyrant who is worshipped by native Africans whom he subjugates. Marlow witnesses’ various aspects of these horrors from the senseless violence that was meted on the African population to the environmental destruction caused by European greed. Numerous images highlight the darkness of colonial venture throughout the novella like the description of a grove inhabited by dying native labourers.

In “The Book of Secrets,” Vassanji presents a more differentiated perspective on colonialism. An Indian-Tanzanian teacher, Pius Fernandes, one day stumbles upon an account book belonging to Alfred Corbin, a British colonial officer which consequently anchors the novel’s narrative. Through the diary of Corbin and Fernandes’ thoughts, the colonialist’s multifaceted lives become apparent for instance their relationship with the native people from whom they derive their wealth or power and also different ethnic groups. The story demonstrates how traditional social orders were destroyed by this colonial regime causing the imposition of new hierarchies that have lasted throughout time in East Africa. For example, while reading his diaries we find out about conflicts between his personal feelings and principles whereas the life of Pius mediates between colonists and indigenous societies according to him.

Identity and Colonialism

The novella *Heart of Darkness* explicitly links the theme of identity to the experience of colonialism. When Marlow travels into the interior of Africa, the trip serves as a metaphorical exploration of his own identity and moral compass. Marlow is a character who struggles with definitions of civilization and savagery, coming to terms with his capacity for evil as well as the human propensity towards darkness. Kurtz offers a portrayal of identity erosion in a colonial setting, transforming from an idealist to a person who has been morally undone by his time in the African wilderness. Kurtz's final words, “The horror! The horror!” articulate the abyss he has plunged into after being pushed to the brink by the overreach of colonial greed and authority. Identity emerges as the most prominent of the themes in *The Book of Secrets*, foregrounded through the multiplicity of characters that Tang Tang uses to explore the issue of colonialism. Moving across the lives of subjects from India, Africa, and Britain who have settled in East Africa, the text represents identity, in its thousand forms, as a set of identities that are in a continual state of formation and deformation, partially under the control of colonialism. The novel follows Pius Fernandes, the novel's narrator, who has a conflicting identity of sorts; Fernandes is of Indian heritage and has lived entirely in East Africa. Throughout the novel, as Fernandes makes his way through Rupert Corbin's diaries, he moves simultaneously through an identity crisis, considering his cultural roots as well as the history and complexity of identity itself. Vassanji additionally tracks the ways that colonialism disturbs cohesive identifications like those that Fernandes draws on as well as prompts the creation of new identities that often exist only in a state of plurality.

Comparative Analysis of Themes

Both novels explore identity within colonialism but from different angles. In "Heart of Darkness," people like Marlow and Kurtz undergo psychological and moral alterations that test who they are. The story implies that meeting an alien culture during colonization makes people have to face themselves, which is usually unpleasant. By describing Africa as incomprehensible and dangerous, Conrad creates a setting in which the characters can struggle with their innermost thoughts; this underscores how corrosive being colonized can be. "The Book of Secrets" adopts a wider socio-cultural outlook, studying how colonialism affects collective and personal identities as time passes. In his characters, Vassanji explores a maze of cultural forces which shows hybrid and often fragmented identities in colonial and postcolonial societies. This book emphasizes fluidity and plurality of identity within colonial conditions, as opposed to Conrad's more self-reflective and single-minded approach. Furthermore, Vassanji examines the identity crisis facing people from India living abroad who are torn between their African surroundings and Indian roots thereby giving additional depth to the discussion on identity. to someone's sense of self.

Impact of Colonialism on Society

The novel "Heart of Darkness" is, indeed, a powerful commentary on the imperialism of Europe especially exploring how the Belgians had been unearthing the Congo. Conrad describes the workings of the colonial venture as inherently ruthless and ruthless. The Europeans, motivated solely by the need to get rich, exploited the land and its mineral endowment to the detriment of the native people. This cruel exploitation is emblematised by the ivory trade, which occupies a pivotal role in the novella. The African natives are portrayed as nothing more than the colonizers' instruments that are enslaved, tortured, and made to work under devastating circumstances. This ruthless domination only serves as evidence of the immoral nature of the colonization process. This novella paints a very clear picture of the effects of dehumanization on both the side of the colonized as well as the side of the colonizers. The African natives lose their humanity and are depicted as Blacks who are suffering in silence while being dominated by their masters from Europe. It is imperative to note that they are called vulgar names that enslave and deny them individual personalities. On the other hand, the Europeans – who are primarily motivated by money and control – are depicted as having no soul or empathy. Kurtz, a character who begins as a noble protagonist of Western civilization, succumbs to

authoritarian barbarism, representing the dehumanizing potency of imperialistic capability and greed. In this book imperialism also refers to the element of the erosion of the native cultures in 'Heart of Darkness'. European colonizers impose their political, religious, and social systems upon the African natives, often using violence to eradicate the original traditions. This imperialism is illustrated in the meddling with the social life of the local people and the imposition of European norms. The geography of Africa illustrated in this book: is dark, dreary and chaotic is the cultural degeneration of the natives. It is, therefore, possible to assert that one of the primary subjects of the novella is the psychological aspect of colonialism. The setting of the novel is hence allegorical and acts as a canvas that allows Marlowe to delve into the human heart. It alters him as a character and makes him doubt everything that he has thought was true about the world. This was depicted in the story with Kurtz who in the film epitomized the potential hazards to the holder of power and corrupting influence. It also shows how the colonial mission was a hypocrisy. The Europeans portray themselves as harbingers of civilization, enlightenment, and all things progressive, but their dark sides come to light when they colonize "savage" territories. Ironically, the Company, which is depicted to be performing a humanitarian service, is motivated by materialism and is thus involved in uncivilized behaviours. Kurtz who was initially portrayed as a visionary with noble ambitions of bringing civilization to the African people turns into a tyrant whose actions are characterized by horror. It denounces the moral decay and the hypocrisy that lies at the very heart of colonialism, thus challenging the legitimacy of the enterprise.

"The Book of Secrets" presents a multifaceted review of colonialism's socio-economic effects on East Africa. It relates to the change of colonial power from Germany to Britain while reflecting the given and inflicted social transformations. Imperialist practices and Nimr's descriptions of capitalist exploitation destroy the indigenous way of living and organization. The cultivation of cash crops, the introduction of taxes, and forced labour for Indigenous people changed their position in the economies, negatively, as a rule. The novel presents Africans' experiences in their futile attempts to adjust to these changes which have been imposed on them for colonial gains and illustrates the economic vulnerability and suffering that resulted from colonial conquest. In "The Book of Secrets," colonialism leads to substantial cultural displacement and loss of the desired self. The characters play an exodus role as they uncomfortably negotiate their endeavours in the light of colonialism and subsequent diaspora. Culture has come out very central in the story where people found themselves struggling to maintain their traditional heritage while taking Canadian values which they have

embraced. The search for the diary of a completely unknown person, Alfred Corbin, is one of the major themes of the book, which can be interpreted as a search for the buried past and lost heritage. Vassanji highlights a sense of splitting of personality due to colonialism displacing the original indigenous cultures hence characters are torn between their traditional and colonial norms. Political power is also a major subject depicted in the novel regarding the effects of colonialism such as the rebellions and struggle for liberation. To some extent, the concept of diaspora and migration as a result of colonialism can also be understood when analysing “The Book of Secrets”. The novel relays the lives of East African immigrants settling in Canada as they grapple with the burdens of displacement, cultural metamorphosis, and alienation. Specifically, this diaspora can be studied through the relationships between the characters’ movements and the larger pattern of migration and colonial legacies in the world’s history. Vassanji accurately portrays the social and psychological impact of migration and migrants, the struggle to find identity between two cultures or the desire of the migrants to reconnect with their roots. Colonialism is thought of in the context of generational trauma in the novel, where one generation’s suffering defines the lives of the next. The connections are shared but different pasts and colonialism are present in one way or another, as a form of trauma, memory and/or strength. By entwining various threads of male narratives within and across generations, the novel explores the stability and transformation of East African societies. Vassanji’ narrativize the oft-repeated process of trying to reconcile with the past, to recover from its trauma and to search for an affiliation in the post-colonial world.

Comparative Analysis

“Heart of Darkness” is a short story portraying the exploitative aspect of colonialism in the geographical sense, colonialism in “The Book of Secrets” is more of an exploitation of people’s beliefs and hope. Conrad channels attention to the faceless and barbaric use of the Congo by the Belgians while painting the Europeans as degenerate savages. While focusing more on political changes affecting nations, Vassanji describes the socio-economic and cultural transformations in East Africa to show more extensive and profound consequences of both German and British colonialisms. The effects of cultural identity are another major issue that has been explored in both texts. “Heart of Darkness” is concerned with the negation of culture and the effacing of the African subject, “The Book of Secrets” foregrounds issues of displacement and the ambivalent subject in the post-colonial diaspora. It can be seen that Vassanji’s exposition of memory and inheritance differs from that of Conrad emphasizing the destruction at that particular moment. Both these narratives

involve the issue of the psychological consequences of colonialism. Using the character of Marlow and the story of Kurtz Conrad's novella is a reflection of the lack of clear morality and the terrible depths of the human personality. While Taylor builds on this, Vassanji further takes it into the diaspora where one gets to see the inter-generational trauma and the psychic battle for self and social recognition. Ultimately, Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" as a framed plot and heterogeneous narrative structure offers a complex, contemplative analysis of colonialism. Unlike the single generation depicted in the Amrita narrative, Vassanji focuses on multiple generations in *The Book of Secrets* and gives a wider historical and cultural context that is useful to understand the long-term impact of colonialism. Both narrative modes can tap into and explore the residual and accumulated effects of colonialism albeit with different perspectives.

Conclusion

The books "Heart of Darkness" and "The Book of Secrets" present different sides of the problem of colonialism which help us to get a better vision of its historical and modern meaning. Conrad's short story brings to light the fact that the colonial era was marked by extreme brutality, dehumanization as well as moral decadence in various colonies, specifically in Congo, through the employment of rich symbolism and an introspective narrative style. The novel by Vassanji spans generations and continents so this way develops a wider perspective on socio-economic cultural, and political aspects affected by colonialism in East Africa while emphasizing the significance of identity memory, & resistance. These two works do not only focus on colonization from a simple one-dimensional viewpoint but rather show how complex its consequences are for many aspects of society, identity and culture. Both novels suggest that an appreciation of self-identity is unavoidable if individuals are to survive cultural imperialism". In this paper the complexities and contradictions of colonial narratives are brought into focus by way of a comparative analysis. These works depict how the transgressions of colonialism are so deep, and also, how their forms can last forever, even if the new regimes are established on these lands. Both the themes of imperialism and resilience can be focused on in your research project about literature of Anglophone Africa. Your next step may be discovering an interesting approach to conducting a comparison of texts that come from different regions. This approach may help to highlight common themes that run through many postcolonial literatures such as colonization, identity and gender issues. The discussion of these concepts is very important because they play significant role in history of former colonies and continue to influence their development nowadays.

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