

A Feminist Criticism to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad'ın *Heart of Darkness*'ına Feminist Bir Eleştiri

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Özet

Conrad'ın *Heart of Darkness* adlı çalışması birçok açıdan değerlendirilmiştir. Fakat bu yapıtta kadına olan yaklaşım gerekli ölçüde çalışılmamıştır. Bu romanda kadının özellikle arka planda tutulduğu açıktır. Bu çalışma kadına yönelik bütün olumsuz yaklaşımlara karşın romanda kadın varlığının önemini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma kadının *Heart of Darkness*'a katkısının düşünüldüğünden daha fazla olduğunu savunmaktadır. Romanın başarısında büyük ölçüde kadın karakterlerinin katkısı vardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın, feminizm, erkek, istismar.

Abstract

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been studied from various points of view by scholars. However; the approach to woman has not been focused to a desired extent. It is evident that the existence of woman has been kept in the background in *Heart of Darkness* purposefully. Despite all unfavourable approach, this paper aims to reveal the importance of women characters in the novel. This study claims that woman characters' contribution to *Heart of Darkness* is much more than the supposed. The success of the novel depends on women to a large extent.

Key Words: Woman, feminism, men, exploitation.

Introduction

It can be considered that *Heart of Darkness* is a novella which is substantially men oriented. That's why it would not make sense to scrutinize it from a feminist point of view. However; such a claim will not be a precise approach when it is read between the lines. It is a fact that women are hardly mentioned in *Heart of Darkness*. Since it is an adventure tale, more than ninety percent of the story is related to men. Even so the concept of women has a key role in the novel. Whether this role appears unfavourable or not is not matter of debate at the first stage. On the other hand a men oriented novella can also receive feminist criticism for ruling out the existence of womanhood. Bringing one

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gender into forefront can spark reaction of the other gender. Conrad has received criticism in this sense, however; this study discusses that women are important in the background of *Heart of Darkness*.

Discussion

As mentioned previously *Heart of Darkness* is an adventure tale which generally passes on a boat. Conrad, himself has worked as a sailor for a long time and he sailed to many parts of the world. *Heart of Darkness* has been inspired from one of his voyages to Congo. Congo was a Belgian colony at that time. The barbaric face of colonialism has been clearly depicted by Conrad in this novella. "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 darkness" (Conrad, 2010). In this sentence, Conrad defines the philosophy of colonialism briefly. The true nature of colonialism is robbery and it is being done in a violent way. Colonizers exploited the wealth and men power of colonized and sometimes it had been done in barbaric methods. The condition of woman in colony is more miserable than the man. They are more defenceless and as a result they are exploited more roughly. This can be seen in *Heart of Darkness* as well. "I have been teaching one of the native women about station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for work" (Conrad, 2010). As understood from the quotation women are considered as potential work force to be exploited. Their free will in preference to do a job or not has no importance. Moreover it is clear that when women are reluctant to carry on a work they are severely punished. The natives are forced to serve to white men with overwork. The colonialism is harsh for native men, but it is barbaric for native women. Owusu supports this claim like this;

If Joseph Conrad's Marlow associates a black person with a dog, then a person who is both black and female is, with a touch of Aido's irony, "the / Most masterly of the / Dogs," slave to the slave. (Owusu, 1990)

Heart of Darkness is full of evidences that support this claim. However Ridley suggests that savagery itself is not evil in this novel, for the cannibal crewmen are depicted as dignified, admirable fellows, restrained by some code of their own, and the superb native woman has both majesty and pathos (Ridley, 1963). It is a fact that despite all maltreatment natives maintain dignity. But this does not absolve Con-

rad's approach because Achebe claims that the language Conrad uses for the natives is racist (Achebe, 1989). He defines Africans as savages. Actually the real savagery is done by the colonizers. It can be suggested that at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* Conrad is tender about the Africans. However; Okafor states that "The continent and its people are used merely as a background for this narrative, which is essentially Eurocentric" (Okafor, 1988). In other words Conrad also has exploited Africa for the sake of his study, for the sake of his art.

There are two women characters that should be focused in *Heart of Darkness*. The first is the African woman, the mistress, and the latter is European, the Intended. This is the way Conrad refers to them. He does not regard it necessary to mention their names. This ignorance is degradation in respect of woman identity. Woman's existence is imposed as unnecessary. The protagonist's, Marlow, view clarifies this claim. "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" (Conrad, 2010). In fact it is the men who keep women away from truth. This role has been casted to women by men. Straus claims that Marlow's distinctly division of world into male and female realms will abort a woman's pleasure in reading *Heart of Darkness* (Straus, 1987). Narrator's approach to women is mostly underestimating. Women are presented as tiny details while conveying the story. However, it appears as a waste of effort to keep women's existence in the background.

Both women characters appear in the last chapter of *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad prefers to bring them into scene by the end of the novel. Kurtz' mistress, African woman, is the one who comes to the stage first. Marlow first sees her on the gloomy border of the forest. "And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" (Conrad, 2010). There is ambivalence in Marlow's confrontation with the native woman. Although she has a gorgeous apparition, she still keeps her wild side. The only grace that he can bestow to her is the beauty. But this grace is not sufficient to evaluate her as a human being. From his point of view she is like a beautiful wild animal with a beautiful skin. She is a savage who is potentially dangerous. The sailors' alert at her appearance is a clear evidence for their anxiety. Despite all disdainful assessment the African

woman stands upright in front of European man. “She carried her head high” (Conrad, 2010) and “She looked at us all as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance” (Conrad, 2010). Her posture is a challenge to all men, in a wide perspective it is a defying to colonialism. The strength of European man does not cause any fear in her. Although it may not be Conrad’s intention, however; she appears as a strong feminist element.

The African woman does not have any utterances in the *Heart of Darkness*. What the reader can deduce about her is result of her appearance, behaviour and the thoughts of other characters about her. She has a silent power. This strength causes uneasiness to some white people. “If she had offered to come aboard I really think I would have tried to shoot her” (Conrad, 2010). This sentence is uttered by one of the crew. Her approach is considered so dangerous that he even thinks to shoot her. By the end of *Heart of Darkness* some of the crew actualizes this desire. There are some pilgrims on the boat. As the boat leaves, the inhabitants and the woman appear on the border again. As the pilgrims attempt to fire, the natives fell flat face down on the shore, but the woman stands still. The vision is lost in the smoke of fired rifles (Conrad, 2010). There is no evidence whether the woman is killed or not. Although the men stand aside, the woman appears as a symbol of strength in front of the rifles of the white men. What attracts attention most is that the ones who fire are pilgrims. It gives clues about church’s attitude to natives, especially native woman. They see no harm in shooting a defenceless woman. The African woman’s existence in *Heart of Darkness* comes to an end after this scene.

Heart of Darkness lasts as soon as the Intended meets the reader. She appears as a woman who still mourns for her fiancé who died a year ago. The role of mourner given to woman is an expectation of society. What makes this situation more tragic is that she is mourning for the person who cheated her. She lives in an illusion. Actually this statement confirms Marlow’s claim that women are living far from reality. This casting which is unfavourable for women is done by men. Marlow has the opportunity to wake the Intended from her illusion. However; he prefers to keep her far from reality. He does not tell her the truth in favour of men. The truth could lessen her sorrow. If she

had known the reality, maybe she would have realised that her mourning was pointless. But Marlow thinks that; “She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (Conrad, 2010). A suffering woman is performing her role perfectly. Her mourning is represented as a virtue. And for Marlow this virtuous act should keep on going.

Conclusion

Heart of Darkness is built up with many contradictions. The two women come from very different cultures and backgrounds. The general expectation would be a strong European woman and a weak African woman. However; what happens is just the opposite of the expectations. The African woman is strong and causes fear in the hearts of white man. The Intended appears as a weak, pure and innocent woman. The first one symbolizes wild, the latter symbolizes purity. The African woman is more real, the European woman lives in an illusion. She is in such an illusion she claims that “... no one knew him so well as I. I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best” (Conrad, 2010). This claim shows the naiveness of the Intended. Either way there is degradation of woman by Conrad. Because, the Intended is somehow the representative of all European women. Intended’s voice does not bring any dignity to womanhood. On the other hand although the African woman is voiceless, her efficiency is much more than the latter. The native woman holds her head high, she stands still even when facing the rifles. This dignity causes respect in the reader towards her, while the European woman’s mourning; her crying causes pity. Marlow strikes an attitude of a hero in front of the African woman, but he seems helpless when he meets the Intended. It is because of strength of African woman and weakness of European woman. Despite all differences, two women have something in common. Both of them have been cheated by the same person. They have been exploited by the same man.

In general context of *Heart of Darkness* the disregard of women existence is definite. The existence of women can be considered as a threat to a man-oriented adventure tale. But this is not the case. When the novel is read attentively, it can be deduced that the woman is ignored purposefully. The reader can only meet the main women characters by the end of *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad is unwilling to mention even their names. Despite all these facts the existence of woman is

very essential. Smith states that the women characters are imperative, for they represent foundational symbols of colonialism (Smith, 2009). The women have a great contribution to *Heart of Darkness*. Dilworth draws attention to Intended; “She is even more important to the meaning of the novel than she is generally considered to be” (Dilworth, 1987). The tender last scene majorly depends on the woman, the Intended. It is the African woman who makes the Congo-part of novel exciting. If women are removed from the novel it would become just a dull work. It is the role of women what makes the novel a masterpiece.

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Özet

Conrad'ın *Heart of Darkness* adlı çalışmasını kaleme aldığı zaman, sömürgeciliğin dünya çapında yaygın olduğu bir döneme denk gelmektedir. Bu yapıt büyük ölçüde Belçika'nın Kongo'daki sömürgesinde geçmektedir. Sömürgeciliğin revaçta olduğu bu zaman dilimi, kadın haklarının henüz çok gelişmediği bir döneme de denk gelmektedir. *Heart of Darkness*'i eline alan bir okuyucu ilk etapta romanın

genelinde kadının arka planda tutulduğunu görebilir. Conrad'ın bu yapıtı üzerine birçok çalışma yapılmasına karşın, kadına olan yaklaşım konusu çok incelenmemiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı *Heart of Darkness*'da kadına olan yaklaşımı feminist eleştiri penceresinden ele almaktır. Conrad, bu yapıtında kadına çok az yer vermiştir. Bu nedenle kadınların olduğu kısımların dikkatlice okunması gerekmektedir. Bu çalışmada, kadının sahneye çıktığı kısıtlı bölümlerden mümkün olduğunca veri çıkarılmaya çalışılmıştır. *Heart of Darkness*'da önemli olan iki kadın karakter vardır. Yazar, bu kadın karakterleri romanın son bölümüne kadar okuyucuyla buluşturmak istememiştir. Ancak romanın son sahnesinde ortaya çıkan ilk kadın karakter Kurtz'ün Afrikalı metresidir. Bu kadın sessiz bir karakter olarak ortaya çıkar. Herhangi bir konuşması duyulmayan bu karakter ile ilgili elde edilen veriler, diğer karakterlerin onun hakkındaki düşünceleri ve kadının dış görünüş ve hareketleri sonucudur. Conrad'ın vahşi olarak nitelendirdiği Afrikalı kadın güçlü ve dik duruşuyla okuyucunun beğenisini kazanır. İkinci ve son olarak ortaya çıkan kadın karakter ise Kurtz'ün Avrupalı nişanlısıdır. Güçlü Afrikalı kadına karşın, zayıf Avrupalı kadın okuyucuya şaşırtıcı gelebilir. Sömürülen, ezilen Afrikalı kadının dik duruşu, Avrupalı kadında görülmemektedir. Avrupalı kadın aldatıldığından habersiz olarak nişanlısının yasını tutmaktadır. Bir yıl süren bu yas tutma sürecini bir ömür boyu devam ettirme kararlılığı içindedir. Marlow, böylesi bir yanılısma içinde yaşayan kadını, bu durumdan kurtarabilme gücüne sahip olmasına karşın, istencini bu yönde kullanmaz ve kadının bir ömür boyu yas tutup, acı çekmesine neden olur. Conrad bu sahneyi, okuyucuya erdemli bir sahne olarak kabul ettirmeye çalışmaktadır. Yas tutan kadının erdemli bir yaklaşım sergilediği düşüncesi toplumun kadına yüklediği görevlerden biri olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Marlow, bu kadının yas tutmaya yetenekli olduğunu belirtirken bir anlamda kadınları aşağılamaktadır. Aldatan adam için yas tutan kadın yadırganmamakta, bu konuda cesaretlendirilmektedir. Her iki kadın karakter çok farklı altyapı ve kültürlerden gelmektedir. Her iki kadının bütün farklılıklarına karşın ortak bir noktaları bulunmaktadır. Her ikisi de aynı erkek tarafından, Kurtz tarafından sömürülmüştür. Kadına karşı olan bütün olumsuzluklara karşın elde edilen veriler ışığında kadının aslında romanda anahtar rollere sahip olduğu görülmüştür. Kadın karakterler her ne kadar arka planda tutulmaya çalışılmış olsa da, kadının üstlendiği rolün önemi arka plana atılamamıştır. *Heart of Darkness*'ın Afrika'da geçen kısmının en can alıcı sahneleri Afrikalı kadın karakterin olduğu sahnelerdir. Bununla birlikte Avrupalı kadının bulunduğu son sahne, romanın duygusal olarak doruğa ulaştığı sahnedir. Kadınların olduğu sahnelerin romandan çıkarılması durumunda, *Heart of Darkness* bir başyapıt olmaktan çıkacak, sıradan bir çalışmaya dönecektir. Bütün bunların karşın *Heart of Darkness*'da kadının özellikle arka planda tutulduğu görülmektedir. Bu çalışma kadına yönelik bütün olumsuz yaklaşımlara karşın romanda kadın varlığının önemini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Kadın karakterlerin *Heart of Darkness*'a katkısının düşünülmediğinden daha fazla olduğunu gözlenmektedir. Romanın başarısında büyük ölçüde kadın karakterlerinin katkısı vardır.

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