



SURVIVAL STRATAGEMS IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Preethi N.R^{*}, P. Revathi², Bindu M. R³, Prakash A⁴, Roselin Kiruba. R⁵

^{*}Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Saguntala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai-600062
E-mail: rajampreethi@gmail.com

²Associate. Professor & Head, Dept. of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Saguntala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai-600062

³Professor, Dept. of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Saguntala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai-600062

⁴Professor, Dept. of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Saguntala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai-600062

⁵Asst. Professor, Dept. of Computer Science, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Saguntala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai-600062

Received: November 05, 2024, **Accepted:** December 06, 2024, **Online Published:** December 15, 2024

ABSTRACT

This research examines survival as a multifaceted interaction of physical, psychological, and ethical problems within the adverse context of the Congo River and the European empire in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The physical aspect of survival pertains to withstanding the difficult natural environment—perilous waterways, oppressive jungles, tropical ailments, and widespread solitude. Marlow, the protagonist, demonstrates resilience through his realistic approach, careful observation, and steady drive to traverse the river's perils. The characters oppose profound alienation and sorrow stemming from the wilderness's suffocating expanse and the harsh truths of colonial exploitation. Marlow counters mental pressures through introspection and narrative, preserving his sense of purpose, but Kurtz, plagued by power and solitude, yields to the darkness within, epitomising the fragmentation of the human psyche. The ethical aspect of survival is crucial, as Conrad explores the conflict between preserving humanity and succumbing to the dehumanising influences of wealth and violence intrinsic to

imperialism. Marlow maintains a prudent detachment, witnessing the atrocities of colonialism without entirely sacrificing his principles, while Kurtz's decline into moral depravity underscores the disastrous effects of forsaking ethical constraints. *Heart of Darkness* depicts survival not merely as endurance but as a significant examination of identity, integrity, and resilience. This research intertwines physical, mental, and moral survival within a narrative that illustrates humanity's endeavour to confront misfortune without succumbing to despair.

Keywords: Congo, Darkness, Endurance, Survival, and Realistic Approach.

1. Introduction

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), a Polish-British author, is recognised as one of the preeminent novelists in the English language. Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, born in Russian-occupied Poland, experienced a formative existence characterised by exile, bereavement, and a profound affinity for his homeland's quest for independence. Upon enlisting in the French and British merchant marines, he dedicated years to seafaring, traversing vast distances, which significantly influenced his literary creativity. Conrad's composition frequently examines issues of colonialism, human nature, and existential conflict, characterised by his unique story, psychological perceptiveness, and proficiency in English, his third language.

One of his most renowned works is *Heart of Darkness* (1899), a novella influenced by his 1890 expedition to the Congo Free State during the peak of European imperialism in Africa. "Joseph Conrad worked as a pilot on a steamship

in the Belgian Congo, and *Heart of Darkness* is at least in part based on his experiences there" (Florman, 2013). The narrative is about Charles Marlow, a riverboat captain, who journeys into the African interior to locate the mysterious Kurtz, an ivory trader whose spiral into insanity exemplifies the corrupting influence of unrestrained power and imperial avarice. "Marlow feels pity for the natives unlike other the majority of colonizers" (Güven, 2020, p.82). The novella employs the symbolic elements of the Congo River, nature, and the inherent darkness in individuals and societies to attack imperialism and examine the tenuous limits of morality, sanity, and civilisation. *Heart of Darkness*, a seminal work in modernist literature, incites ongoing discourse on its depiction of Africa, European colonialism, and the human condition, thereby solidifying Conrad's status as an author who confronted the intricacies of the modern period. This research shows the internal conflict people have in the harshness of



existence, reflecting the seclusion and reflection required for survival. To quote, "We live as we dream - alone. While the dream disappears, the life continues painfully" (Conrad, 1899, p.2).

2. Objectives

- To examine the depiction of physical survival in the setting of the Congo River
- To examine the psychological survival schemes utilised by the characters
- To analyse the moral difficulties associated with survival
- To think of the universal implications of survival

3. Research Methodology

A qualitative research methodology is suitable for examining survival strategies in *Heart of Darkness*, as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of themes, symbols, and character behaviour within the novella. This methodology emphasizes textual analysis, drawing on interpretive and descriptive approaches to uncover the nuanced dimensions of physical, psychological, and moral survival. "Qualitative research can be defined as the study of the nature of phenomena and is especially appropriate for answering questions of why something is (not) observed, assessing complex multi-component interventions, and focussing on intervention improvement" (Busetto,

2020). The qualitative methodology reveals how Conrad's examination of survival strategies mirrors broader human challenges related to adversity, morality, and existential crises.

4. Research Questions

- How does the characters' contemplation oblige as a psychological survival mechanism during the journey through the Congo?
- What physical survival techniques do the characters use to withstand the harsh natural environment?
- How do the characters make virtuous sacrifices to survive in the ethically uncertain background of the Congo?

5. Discussion

"The novella's setting provides the frame for Marlow's story of his fascination for the prolific ivory trader Kurtz. Conrad draws parallels between London and Africa as places of darkness" (Achebe, 2000, p.2023). A sailor named Marlow writes about his trip up the Congo River into the heart of colonial Africa. A European trading company sends Marlow to find Kurtz, an ivory dealer who has gone rogue. He has to do this in a dangerous wilderness that represents the dark and complicated nature of people. As Marlow goes deeper into the bush, he sees how European colonists are cruelly taking advantage of African natives. This shows how empty so-called civilisation is.

The wild, untamed, and uncaring wilderness has a deep effect on the minds of those who enter it, making them less human. Kurtz used to be a very ambitious and idealistic man, but he has given in to the wilderness's allure and now rules over the locals like a god. Kurtz is almost dead when Marlow finally meets him. When Marlow gets back to Europe, he is disappointed and troubled by what he has seen and by how morally grey people are in general. The story analyses the empire and looks at themes like the darkness within society, the fragility of the human mind, and the thin line between chaos and order. The American journalist-cum-writer Blaine Harden writes about the river in his book *Africa: Despatches from a Fragile Continent*. The book portrays the uncomfortable and horrific journey. It is clear from:

The most serene spot, the only serene spot, was out on the bow. The growl of diesel engines and the smell of excrement could be forgotten here. The riverboat seemed to move without effort, with hardly a sound, almost outside of time. Its rusted snout hissed soothingly as it slipped downstream through the great river (Harden, 1987).

5. 1 Physical Survival

In *Heart of Darkness*, the Congo River is shown as both an important blood vessel and a source of constant physical pain. The river is seen as a metaphorical

outlet that connects the tamed world to the untamed forest, while also posing dangers that test people's strength. The harsh conditions of nature, including high heat, lots of plants, sickness, and being alone, test your physical strength. To quote,

Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world when vegetation rioted on the earth, and the big trees were kings... There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare for yourself, but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. Moreover, this stillness of life did not in the least resemble peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect (Conrad, 1899, p.1).

As the main character of the novella, Marlow represents the necessary strategies for physical endurance. "For Marlow, the journey up the Congo River is a voyage of self-exploration and self-realization, which gives deep insight into the dark recess of the human mind" (Yadav, 2024, p.129). As a seasoned sailor, he approaches the river with care and realism, using observation and



flexibility to get across its unpredictable currents. His ability to stay calm and resourceful is crucial to his survival, even as those around him give up in the face of hostile surroundings. The European crew members, on the other hand, often get tropical diseases and poor health because they are too used to European norms in a strange land and are not prepared enough.

Conrad also compares European people to Africans who live in the area. This is clearly explained as:

The Congo also represents Africa. The river does not want Europeans in Africa, so it makes the journey difficult to go into the country but easy to go the other way. The water flows quickly downstream, taking the white man out of Africa but slowly on the way into Africa. When Marlow is going up the river to find Kurtz, he struggles not only with the river but also with trying to figure out the challenges that lay before him (Hunt, 2010).

The Africans know more about the land and its conditions, which helps them survive better. This difference brings out the irony of imperialism: the colonizers, who say they will bring culture to the area they take over, are physically not able to do so.

5.2 Psychological Survival

The physical problems are tough, but the mental problems the main characters have to deal with are much worse. The wilderness is suffocating because it takes away the mask of society and lets people face their deepest fears. The characters are lonely, depressed, and going through a psychological crisis when they realise how small they are in the vast, uncaring wilderness. "The psychological horror results from imperialism's degrading impacts on both colonizers and colonized people. Marlow observes how the European invaders brutally treated the African natives and exploited them for their labour and resources" (Mazumder, 2023).

Marlow's main way of staying mentally healthy is to think about him and tell stories. He separates himself from the immediate horrors of the Congo by seeing his trips as part of a bigger story. He keeps his mental health even though he has to deal with the brutalities of colonialism and the moral decline of people like Kurtz because he watches and understands what is going on around him.

To quote:

The wilderness had found him out early and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great

solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core... but his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad (Conrad, 1899, p.53).

This shows that staying alive is not just a battle against outside forces; it is also a deep battle with oneself, and the wilderness acts as both an enemy and a mirror to the soul.

Kurtz draws a picture of the mental breakdown that happens when someone gives in to the wilderness's power and isolation. Kurtz loses touch with reality when he is cut off from the rules of European society. He goes crazy and accepts the darkness inside him. His last dying words are, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 1899, p.116), showing how aware he is of the moral and psychological chasm he has fallen into. Kurtz's death shows what happens when people lose their mental toughness in times of extreme suffering.

5.3 Moral Survival

The moral part of staying alive is the most important issue in *Heart of Darkness*. This shows how the situation makes people less human by forcing characters to make moral choices to stay alive in a world of violence and exploitation. For Marlow to stay decent, he

needs to be able to keep some distance from what is happening. Even though he does not openly condemn the horrible things he sees, he also does not fully take part in them either. Moreover, even though he works in a very crooked system, he is still able to keep his humanity by carefully navigating the moral grey area.

On the other hand, the fact that Marlowe was active in imperialism portrays how long someone can stay in an environment like that and still be moral. However, Kurtz is a sign of the bad behaviour that would happen when power is not limited. After breaking free from society's rules, he stops caring about right and wrong and starts acting violently, greedily, and worshipping himself in front of other people. "Thus, lust for power and wealth is such an instinct that corrupts humanity to a large scale and reduces into savagery" (Ruman, 2014, p. 4). He went from being an idealistic guy to a figure of complete and total moral degradation. This shows how the novella criticises imperialism and how unstable human ethics are when faced with absolute power.

6. Conclusion

The research conveys that staying alive is not just a matter of endurance; it is also a deep test of how well people can deal with life's problems without forgetting who they are. Conrad uses the Congo



River as a metaphor for a journey into the heart of human nature. This journey shows how unstable society is and how easy it is for people to give in to darkness. Researchers are looking into the fine balance that has to be kept to deal with physical pain, keep mental health stable, and stay decent. This is done with the help of the unique escape strategies that Marlow and Kurtz use. Overall, it is a timeless reflection of the human situation. It makes readers think about what it means to keep going even when things are very hard.

References

- Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness". *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2 (7th edition), 2000, p. 2036.
- Busetto, Loraine, et al. "How to Use and Assess Qualitative Research Methods." *Neurological Research and Practice*, vol. 2, no. 1, May 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>.
- Conrad, J. *Heart of Darkness*. (1899). Fingerprint! Publishing, 2023.
- Florman, Ben. "Heart of Darkness". *LitCharts*. 2013. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/heart-of-darkness#context>.
- Güven, Samet. "(PDF) Post-Colonial Analysis of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *ResearchGate*, 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271284063_Post-Colonial_Analysis_of_Joseph_Conrad's_Heart_of_Darkness.
- Harden, Blaine, "Overloaded, Smelly and Mean Traveling Poor in Africa." *The Washington Post*. 1987. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/11/09/overloaded-smelly-and-mean-traveling-poor-in-Africa/b95e9c87-5e6d-4f12-b3ee-c2aa94bf3726/>
- Hunt, Lynne. "Symbolism of the Congo River in Heart of Darkness". *eNotes*. 2010 <https://www.enotes.com/topics/heart-of-darkness/questions/symbolism-of-the-congo-river-in-heart-of-darkness-3119058>.
- Mazumder, Puja. "Heart of Darkness". *Research Gate*. 2023. 10.13140/RG.2.2.18253.45288.
- Ruman, Md Abdul Karim. "(PDF) Dark Heart inside White Skin: A Quest for Savagery in Heart of Darkness." *ResearchGate*, 2014, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268816438_Dark_Heart_inside_White_Skin_A_Quest_for_Savagery_in_Heart_of_Darkness.
- Yadav, Prabhu Ray. "A Journey towards Self-discovery in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*". Vol. 8, Issue 1. *Nepal Journal*. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3126/pursuits.v8i1.65344>.