

Colonialism and its Socio-politico and Economic Impact: A Case study of the Colonized Congo

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Abstract

The exploitation of African Congo during colonial period is an interesting case study. From 1885 to 1908, it remained in the clutches of King Leopold II. During this period the Congo remained a victim of exploitation which has far sighted political, social and economic impacts. The Congo Free State was a large state in Central Africa which was in personal custody of King Leopold II. The socio-politico and economic study of the state reflects the European behaviour and colonial policy, a point of comparison with other colonial experiences. The analysis can be used to show that the abolition of the slave trade did not necessarily lead to a better experience for Africans at the hands of Europeans. It could also be used to illustrate the problems of our age. The social reformers, political leaders; literary writers and the champion of human rights have their own approaches and interpretations. Joseph Conrad is one of the writers who observed the situation and presented them in fictional and historical form in his books, Heart of Darkness, The Congo Diary, Notes on Life and Letters and Personal Record. In this paper a brief analysis is drawn about the colonialism and its socio-political and psychological impact in the historical perspectives.

Keywords: Colonialism, Exploitation, Colonialism, Congo.

Introduction

The state of Congo, the heart of Africa, was colonized by Leopold II, king of the Belgium from 1885 to 1908. During this period it remained in the clutches of colonialism. King Leopold II of the Belgians was interested in the making of colonies for securing the raw materials for his country which was then the second-most industrialized country in Europe. He organized a conference in 1876 in Brussels to end the slave trade in the Congo. However, he

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was interested in personal monetary gains. He provided facilities to the American explorer Stanley to travel up the Congo and build roads and trading posts on the north bank of the Congo River. Stanley set up the post of Leopoldville on the south bank in 1882. In 1885 the Congo Free State came into being with two main divisions:

- The smaller one was made available for free trade;
- The larger one was kept in his personal control. Later on, about 100,000 square miles from the free trade area was also included and merged with this area.

The literary and political figures consider the rule of Leopold as the brutal period of the Congo history as he kept the state in his control for personal gains and exploitation. He explored and transported the natural resources through the colonized Congolese who were made slaves and controlled with brutal force. The irony of fact is that to the outer world he gave an impression that his rule and control was quite beneficial for the people of Congo. The Congolese slaves were compelled for the construction of the railways track and roads: the construction of the 270-mile railway line from Matadi to Kinshasa, is an example in this regard. This track was laid in 1898 and was completed in 8 years, during which thousands of Congolese lost their lives. It is estimated that about 10 million Congolese were died or affected due to hunger, disease and starvation.

The territory of Congo was rich in ivory and other minerals, including diamonds. The British, French and Germans were jealous that King Leopold owned such a vast rich area of Africa. To resolve the controversy they set up an international conference in Berlin in 1884. However, a single African was not invited or included in the conference. The European leaders decided that no country could claim a region of Africa for its own unless there was clear evidence of occupation. In 1885, a year after the Berlin conference, King Leopold II established the Congo Free State which was not a Belgian colony, but a personal possession of King Leopold II. This colonial period had a great impact on the social, political, cultural and economic conditions of Congolese.

The African Congo was the site for the exploration of ivory, minerals, rubber, coffee, Cotton and tea. Bradley links the history of Congo with its economic importance and states that the area was rich in natural resources like ivory, minerals and diamonds. The British, French and Germans were jealous that King Leopold owned such a vast rich area of Africa.¹ On the

constant pressure of other European countries, King Leopold II decided that all the nations of Europe should have free access to the interior of Africa. Thus all European nations remained involved in the exploration and transportation of ivory and other natural resources to their own countries. The focus of Conrad is only on ivory, everyone is in search of this precious commodity. Conrad (1999) observes this fact and states that the word ivory is ranging all around; it is in the air, it is whispered to each other and it is sighed. The colonizers are worshipping the ivory and other economic benefits. The greed and lust for ivory is everywhere.² The sole pursuit of every individual is ivory. The sole purpose of the colonizers was to get the ivory and other precious stones for themselves and become rich.

The project of Colonialism informs us that the weak nations remained in the clutches of the strong nations at various times. During this period of subjugation the socio-political and ideological systems of the colonized nations were affected to a great extent. Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) writes that the concern of colonialism is mainly about political and economic relationships, some of which may or may not continue after the independence of a state.³ However, the impact remains for a long time; this is what the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o meant when he talked about 'decolonizing the mind'. He further adds that the colonizer and the colonized both carry colonialism in their minds long after the state has gained independence. Ziltener and Kunzler have identified the following motives of the colonialism:⁴

- The drain of wealth from the colonized country
- The control over production and trade
- The exploitation of natural resources

The improvement of infrastructure for transportation

McLeod in his book, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, states, "Colonialism is a particular historical manifestation of imperialism, specific to certain places and times".⁵ It infers that some nations remained in the clutches of others at various times which affected the socio-political and ideological systems of the subjugated nations. For the justification of imposition, the feebleness and inferiority complexes of the colonized have been exploited. Loomba illustrates this justification and states, "Previously held notions about the inferiority of non-Europeans provided a justification for European settlements, trading practices, religious missions and military activity".⁶ In Young's opinion,

Western affluence was predominantly indebted to the large-scale exploitation of the colonies rich in natural resources. He says, "The West's capitalist development during the nineteenth century was directly connected to colonialism".⁷ In European countries, industrialism brought wealth and prosperity. However, raw materials were needed for the factories and mills. Brun links colonialism with industrialism and states that the Industrial Revolution increased the wealth of the European nations. They were in search of raw materials for their factories and new markets for their products.⁸ Between the colonizer and colonized, a specific line is drawn, demarcating their culture, history, art, language, social conventions, political achievements, attitudes, and psychological behaviour. The colonizers targeted these fields through the colonial discourse and don't care for any human rights or human norms.

Review of Literature

The African Congo remains the focus of literary and political figures and social reformer when it was in the clutches of King Leopold II. They have focused on social, economic and political aspects of the Congo Free State.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) is the first writer who informs us about the situation in Congo. As a captain of sea ship he visited the African Congo in 1890. He left from Brussels for Congo on May 10, 1890. He was supposed to be in the Congo for three years, but he became ill at the end of 1890 and came back to London. The details of his actual visit have been accommodated in his monumental travelogue *The Congo Diary*.⁹ He has mentioned the brutalities of the colonizers in great details with several narratives and examples. According to *The Congo Diary* some of the characters in the novel *Heart of Darkness* are quite close to actual people. Joseph Conrad, in a fictionalized version has depicted the characters who he observed during his journey to Congo. His other books *Notes on Life and Letters*¹⁰ and *Personal Record* also confirm all this.¹¹ Owing to his extraordinary sailing life and complicated coming-of-age experiences, his works reflect profound social and historical facts. He recorded the details of his visits in *Heart of Darkness* as he considers the novel a tool of personal experiences and observations and adds that every novel contains an element of autobiography. He has depicted the brutalities of the King's forces quite vividly. They imposed heavy taxes on the inhabitants of Congo and those that were unable to

pay were given heavy punishments; their living abodes were burnt, women were kidnapped and the hands of men were cut off.

As a literary figure, Conrad touched the subject of colonialism in his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1894). However, in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad puts across his philosophy, ideology and view point on the theme of colonialism and keeping in mind the setting of Congo Free State. Phillips links the historical context with *Heart of Darkness* and states that the novel was written in the wake of the 1884 Berlin Conference, which divided the continent of Africa among European nations.¹² Conrad exposes the ulterior motives, avarice and exploitation of the Whites. He compares the historical background of England with Rome. He has mentioned the implicit and explicit symptoms of colonialism and informs us that the present situation of Africa reflects the past of England. The Romans were not colonists but the conquerors who had conquered the country but did not exploit the people and the resources of England. The conditions in England, then, were like the present Africa; quite chaotic. The human beings were dying like flies'. In fact the white people used to go to Africa in the garb of social reformers and missionaries to educate the people over-there. However, after sometimes, they used to break away from the restrictions and themselves become savage and brutal. Conrad has highlighted the economic exploitation, the role of Congo River, the treatment with the womenfolk, the culture, language and the physical and psychological destruction of the human beings during the period of King Leopold II. The main struggle of all Europeans was for the securing of ivory. Thus colonialism was used for the flourishing of capitalism in the western world. For the growth of capitalism, the military strength and political diplomacy were amalgamated to control the economic resources of the Congo Free State. Through the inhabitants of the weak nations, their economic resources are explored and transported. The colonizers used these resources for their own benefit and prosperity. The exploitation of resources was in fact for the Industrial development, which compelled the European Empires to explore and extract raw materials at cheap labour for their own profit. In fact, the European agents had to force Africans at gunpoint to accept extremely low prices. Conrad criticizes the antagonist policy of the king and his supporters and writes about their inhumane attitude. As mentioned above, Leopold II financed the American explorer Stanley to build Leopoldville on the south bank of Congo River. Conrad has mentioned this river and states that The Congo River was quite beneficial for the transportation of natural resources. The

colonizers established the stations for business transactions, on the river. The Congo River benefits their economy. The ivory was transported through the Congo River. However, Conrad has ignored the African cultural heritage (art, painting and language). His main focus is on the issues of colonialism. He is a sharp critic of imperialism and colonialism and his books are the eloquent examples of the inhumanity of European colonialism. As a seaman, Conrad had closely observed the policies of European (British, French, Belgian, Dutch and German) nations and their exploitation of the colonized subjects. He has noted various incidents during his long journey to Congo. Moore observes that Conrad hates imperialism as it causes savageness, selfishness and devastation.¹³ Nassab considers the visit to Congo quite beneficial for literature and adds that *Heart of Darkness* is not just a novel; it portrays a real story of the Africa.¹⁴ Said also endorses this view and suggests that the novel provides information about colonialism and adds that texts like *Heart of Darkness* can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe¹⁵. However, the African writer Chinua Achebe has criticized certain points and narratives in the books of Joseph Conrad. He argues that during his visit Conrad has ignored the reality of art and culture about Congo. Chinua Achebe has explained his critical approach in the light of historical facts¹⁶. He has referred to the visit of Marco Polo and his ignorance about the art and culture of China. Achebe observes that Marco Polo remained with Kublai Khan in his court for about twenty years. After his arrival to his own country, he wrote a book, *Description of the World* which reflects the life, civilization, culture, and customs of the Chinese people. The book is a well-illustrated document about the historical facts; however, there are certain omissions of extraordinary things; The Chinese are the pioneers in the skills of printing press. However, Marco Polo has said nothing about the art of printing press in his book. This is a conscious or unconscious ignorance; which is quite serious rather a blunder on his part. The second blunder is the omission of Great China Wall. The Great Wall of China nearly is a historical fact and is included in the seven wonderers of the world; however, it was not mentioned in the book. Achebe then compares the visit of Conrad and observes that like Marco Polo, Conrad has omitted several monuments and pieces of arts and culture. While criticizing the Conradian approach Achebe indicates that Conrad visited Congo with closed eyes. He neither put his experiences with honesty nor information in a befitting manner.

Bradley has discussed in details the historical perspective of African Congo.¹⁷ He tells us about the inhabitants of the Congo who were living in bands or tribes or kingdoms or empires, and they had territories with boundaries that they defended. There were walled cities with armies, and complex trade relationships. There were long distance trade routes, and alliances and enemies. Indeed, in some places there was even a 2000 year history of contact with the outside world. The people of the Congo were not primitives, cannibals or savages. There is clear evidence that these people had contact with the Egyptians, and that their music was all the rage in the Pharaoh's court. Stanley in his books, *Through the Dark Continent* (1879), *How I found Livingstone in Central Africa* (1890) and *In Darkest Africa* (1891) has covered a picture of the African continent. However, the most comprehensive book about the colonial period is King Leopold's Ghost.

Discussion

The study of colonial period of the Congo Free State can be considered in the historical perspective. It leads us to the history of exploitation of human beings; which has been occurred in a circular manner. However, some parts of the circle cannot be traced. An analogy is drawn by Omer Khayam. He in one of his couplets says; this universe can be compared to an old manuscript whose first and last pages have been lost. Hence it is difficult to say how the book began and how it is likely to end. Philosophy (or for that matter even science) can be match to be a quest for these lost pages. For how long human race has been groping in darkness only heaven knows. Recorded documents go up to the Greeks as the pioneers of this struggle. The same can be stated about imperialism. For how long the human race has crawled under the oppression only heaven knows. The recorded history, however, shows that it began with the Greeks. The Greeks were great fighters and the victors(s) used to devastate everything of the defeated cities. This is confirmed by Joseph Conrad when he states that the Greeks were only the conquerors they did not like to colonize the other nations. With the passage of time, emerged the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle. They tried to unite the Greeks on ethnic and racial grounds and advocated that Greeks should not rush to war against each other. Aristotle assumed the role of a tutor to Alexander who gracefully assumed the motto of his life: "Whenever I see a man, I see a slave". Greeks claimed supremacy over non-Greeks on the bases of language so their claim to imperialism was based on the supremacy of Greek

language and culture. Alexander the great was able to trample upon the known world and Greek imperialism was established far and wide. During their supremacy we witness the institution of slaves and slavery which was justified on the imperialist grounds. The Greeks we know were replaced with Romans; the claim to supremacy of Roman was based on the supremacy of Roman nationalism. Romans were replaced by cluster of European nations. However, they were replaced by the British Imperialism with a slogan of “Whiteman’s Borden” to civilize the ill-culture and uncivilized nations of the world. The British hegemony was challenged by the Germans and their allies. Soon we witnessed the emergence of World War I and II and incredible destruction of human race. With the termination of World War II we see the emergence of US as a candidate for global reforming. The whole world is now watching its calculated moves. In the midst of these horrors we hear an optimistic note of Dr. Martin Luther King junior. “I have a dream”. The essence of the dreams lies in an expectation that a time would come when the contents of the mind and the characters would receive recognition as compared to the color of the skin or the origin. In spite of all the genocidal horrors, man has not given up its demands for global hegemony; which is carried out for the economic benefits. The present study reflects the struggle of European nations for the exploitation and exploration of economic resources of the colonized nations. The European nations conquered the other countries and kept them in control to fuel European economy, which led to capitalism. For the growth of capitalism, the military strength and political diplomacy were also amalgamated for the control of the feeble nations. The colonizers use these resources for their own benefit and prosperity. This exploitation of resources can be linked with the Industrial revolution as well, which gave an impetus to the European Empires to explore and extract raw materials at cheap labour. The raw materials of Africa were explored, transported to their countries, converted into finished products and brought back for the local consumers. For the justification of exploitation, the colonizers also employed various discourses embedded mostly in the educational system, culture, literature and languages. This colonial discourse runs through the narratives as a thread, though in different colours as far as the age, socio-economic and academic backgrounds, interests, professions, and ideologies. Colonialism and exploitation harden the hearts of colonizers and colonized, and thus the union and harmony between them is not possible. The colonial barriers between the European and Africans don’t allow

the communities to come close and socialize. The colonized cannot cross “the sense of possession” of the colonizers. Therefore, The Congolese became victims of the colonial prejudice of the ruling class, their arrogance and rigidity of colonial attitude.

Conclusion

If placed in a contemporary context, colonialism has changed its form, not the content. After its victory in World War II, America was emerged as a global power with the strategy of destabilizing the other nations to capture the global market. The American colonialism has grown stronger after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The war situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria speaks volumes for the way American colonialism has become a global threat to the peace and stability of the world. Connected to the theme is the subject of environmental degradation and global warming, which is organically linked to the greed of the so called developed nations for more and more profits through mass production and consumerism. The world is in need of the far sighted leaders to come up with their imaginative creations for sensitizing the people to the issues globally threatening humanity and its peaceful and productive future. However, under the massive show of global power, there is no hope for sanity to prevail.

Notes & References

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