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## Politics of Representation in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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### Abstract

In this paper the politics of representation in Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness*, a novella that has been at the heart of discussions about colonialism, race and the creation of the "Other" is explored. Through an examination of Conrad's depiction of Africa and Africans, this project explores how the with a text that is at least somewhat reflective of, and critical of, imperial values Slave portrays and promotes both derogatory representations of sub-Saharan Africa, as well as those of an Africa and an African culture that work to reinforce exploitative empires. Leveraging postcolonial theory, including the criticisms by Chinua Achebe and Edward Said, the paper questions the narrative devices impacted by the ideological contents of the novel.

**Keywords:** Politics, Representation, Africa, Conrad

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## Politics of Representation in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

### Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* occupies a complex place in literary and postcolonial studies. Set against the backdrop of European imperialism in Africa, the novella explores the journey of Charles Marlow into the Congo, ostensibly to retrieve the rogue ivory trader Kurtz. However, beyond the narrative of exploration, *Heart of Darkness* delves into the darkness at the heart of European civilization itself. Despite its critique of imperialism, the novel has been accused of perpetuating racist representations of Africa and Africans. This paper argues that the politics of representation in *Heart of Darkness* is deeply ambivalent: while the text critiques imperial exploitation, it also silences African voices and reinforces colonial stereotypes through its narrative choices.

It provides a literary exploration into the continuing discourse of "Otherness" vis-à-vis colonial representation and the negative stereotypes of non-European people and cultures. In this study the other referred to Africans and Non-Europeans. It analyses the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized had been a recurrent feature in fiction and non-fiction. The relationship was usually an unequal one based on the "Self" and the "Other", meaning the "ruler" and the "ruled", the "civilized" and the "uncivilized" and so on. However, this study uses post-colonial literary theory as its theoretical framework to examine the effects of colonialism in the world-renowned novel namely; *Heart of Darkness*. The reason that Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was chosen for this study was because the author attempted to look into the long strained relationship between the colonizer and the colonized from different perspectives.

### Beginning of Colonization.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, European colonial expansion was at its height. By the 1930s, over 80 percent of the land on earth was either colonies or ex-colonies. The extent of colonialism was so vast that „only parts of Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Tibet, China, Siam and Japan had never been under formal European government. In the early fifteenth century, European states began to embark on a series of global voyages that established a new chapter in world history. During this Age there was massive expansion in places such as America, Africa, and the Far East and this was motivated by religion, profit, and power and as a result the size and influence of European empires during this period expanded greatly. The effects of exploration were not only felt abroad but also within the geographic confines of Europe itself. The economic, political, and cultural effects of Europe's global exploration impacted the long term development of both European and the entire world. Furthermore, the principal political actors throughout the Age of Exploration were Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, England, and France. It is imperative to state here that certain European states, like Portugal and The Netherlands, were primarily interested in building empires based on global trade and commerce. These states established worldwide trading posts and the necessary components for developing a successful economic infrastructure. Other European powers, Spain and England in particular, decided to conquer and colonize the new territories they discovered. This was particularly evident in North and South America, where these two powers built extensive political, religious, and social infrastructure. Therefore, the period of European global exploration sparked the beginning phases of European empire and colonialism, which develop and intensify over the course of several centuries. As European exploration evolved and flourished, it saw the increasing oppression of native populations and the enslavement of Africans. It is against this background that this study will focus on the historical context of European colonialism and imperialism.

### Imperialism and the Representation of Africa

Conrad's portrayal of Africa is shaped by the imperialist imagination of his time. Africa is depicted not as a collection of distinct cultures and societies, but as a vast, undifferentiated wilderness—a "blank space" on the map. The novel describes the African landscape as a site of darkness and savagery, often emphasizing its unknowability and primal energy. Marlow's descriptions of the river as an "immense snake" and the jungle as pulsating with a "breath of life" reinforce a mystical, dehumanized image of the continent.

In doing so, *Heart of Darkness* participates in the tradition of exoticizing and marginalizing the colonized world. Africa becomes a backdrop against which European characters stage their existential dramas. The land and its people are stripped of specificity, agency, and voice. As Chinua Achebe famously argued in his 1975 lecture "An Image of Africa," Conrad reduces Africans to mere props: "A few in the background, a mass of incoherent sounds, and a whirl of black limbs." Thus, the novel's critique of imperial greed does not necessarily translate into a respectful or authentic representation of the colonized.

This research analyzes the representation of the other in the novel under study. The main concern of the study is to examine the conflicting views of Conrad in his representation of the Other in *Heart of Darkness*. This study will also be crucial for researchers who are interested in novels about Africa, colonialism and imperialism among other things especially *Heart of Darkness*. Because the text evokes interests in writings about relationship between coloniser and the colonised However the focus of this research is also to uncover how Conrad's approach and portrayal of "Otherness" differs from other works with the same concern, especially in terms of setting, ideology as depicted by the text under study.

### **Every Re-presentation is a Mis- representation**

The word 'racism' refers to a kind of social division that categorises, marginalises, and devalues individuals belonging to non-white racial groups. Marlow, the alter ego of Conrad, always attacks the African black people by presenting them negatively and criticizes the darkness of African natural setting. The term "othering" is coined by Gayatri Spivak, who defines it as the process by which "one group excludes or marginalizes another group"

### **Analysis of racism**

The word racism appears in social, political and cultural theory to denote a kind of discrimination because of the physical complexion and biological characteristics. The term 'racism' is the belief that indicates a kind of discrimination against people on the basis of their skin color or ethnic origin. Racism "involves questions of belonging, location, rights, citizenship, empowerment, welfare, affiliation, and could be the locus of discrimination, exclusion, and oppression" (Nayar, 2010: 217-218). Actually, racism is a technique of the colonizers to achieve their goals of getting more territories, wealth and raw materials. Hence, they treat the natives as animals and savages so that it can be easy to dominate them. Many Europeans argue that *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is the finest example of a criticism of colonialism, although the book is really a narrative of a coloniser who recounts everything in the dark. Chinua Achebe holds the perspective that the depiction of racism in Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), had intricate and captivating qualities. In the opening of the novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the very narrator Marlow recounts his opportunity to assume the role of a steamboat captain on a voyage to Africa. This opportunity arose due to the unfortunate demise of one of the company's captains, who was killed by the indigenous population after a dispute arising from a miscommunication over "two black hens" (Conrad, 1989: 2). Here Marlow recounts the natives of Africa as savages and barbaric because they can kill any person for a trivial matter. Again, Marlow observes blackness in everywhere; even the hens are also black. The very word 'black' categorizes people or place as inferior and evil to the colonizers. Thus, Marlow acquires a kind of prejudice against the native Africans that they are violent in their nature. As a black intellectual warrior, Richard Wright focused this kind of

prejudice of white people and their practice of supremacy over the black people in his novel *Native Son* (1940). By explaining different experiences with the African people and land, Marlow exposes how the native's identity and life style is affected and represented by the colonizers through economically and culturally. Upon his arrival, Marlow meets up with an unfamiliar society and is confronted with a multitude of challenges stemming from dehumanising actions, ultimately leading to a complete feeling of alienation. He describes the natives as under privileged group because of their skin color. Postcolonial thinker Fanon says, "Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (Fanon, 1952: 110). Actually, Conrad presents Africa "as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe" (Achebe, 1977: 252).

*Heart of Darkness* (1899) is a collection of racially biased incidents that are recounted by the narrator, Marlow. He observes the movement of individuals of African descent, stating, "I saw the black people run", "Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path", "Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails" (Conrad, 1989: 19), "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat" (Conrad, 1989: 20). The aforementioned remarks highlight that racism is characterised by the use of language that embodies "mockery, cruelty and discrimination" (Nayar, 2015: 221) and it is a prominent aspect for Conrad, as well as several other Europeans. In an interview with Emily Reddy for Pennsylvania State University, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian author, says that "I didn't think of myself as black when I was in Nigeria because there was no need" (Adichie, 2013). So like Adichie the African people were totally unaware of how the imperialists shape them as black and racially inferior being in their writings. *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is perceived through the eyes of a European and so Marlow displays his racial attitude towards Kurtz's black mistress by saying: "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress" (Conrad, 1989: 60). Here Conrad projects the prejudice of the European people against the black Africans that they are savage and dangerous looking. Marlow notices that she wears "barbarous ornaments . . . her hair was done in the shape of a helmet, she had brass leggings to the knees" (Conrad, 1989: 60). That means her outfit is being questioned as well. The woman is beautiful in her place but in the eyes of colonisers she is savage and uncivilised. Through this approach, the colonisers perpetuate the subordination of indigenous populations and marginalise their cultural heritage. Consequently, Conrad's portrayal of Africa demonstrates his racial bias, since he consistently depicts the continent and its inhabitants as inherently primitive and uncivilised.

### **The Silencing of African Voices**

A notable aspect of *Heart of Darkness* is the near-total absence of African subjectivity. African characters are rarely named or given direct speech. When they do speak, their words are often rendered unintelligible or dismissed by the European narrators. The African woman at Kurtz's station, for example, is described in terms of her physicality and presence, not her thoughts or emotions.

This narrative silencing is crucial to the novel's politics of representation. It reflects the broader colonial practice of denying the colonized the ability to narrate their own experiences. Africans appear as part of the natural landscape, their humanity subsumed by European perceptions. As Gayatri Spivak later argued in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the colonial text often renders the voices of the oppressed inaudible, even as it represents their suffering.

Conrad's decision to frame the story through Marlow, who himself is framed by an unnamed narrator aboard the Thames, further distances the reader from any potential African perspective. Representation thus becomes an act of power, controlling whose stories are told and whose are erased.

### **Othering in *Heart of Darkness* (1899)**

The term 'othering' defines an individual or groups of people who are negatively exposed and labeled as different within the norms of a social group. Othering denotes "(the colonizers' treatment of members of the indigenous culture as less than fully human) and colonial oppression in all its forms" (Tyson, 2006: 427). Postcolonial theorists use the word "other" to describe a position that is granted by a dominating subjectivity to someone or something that is unfamiliar, superfluous, and also seen as the authority's antithesis. According to Lois Tyson, "in order to subjugate an "alien" people, a nation must convince itself that those people are "different," and "different" must mean inferior to the point of being less than fully human (and) in postcolonial terminology, the subjugated people must be othered" (Tyson, 2006: 433). In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Conrad has developed a kind of difference that means binary oppositions of 'us' and 'other' between the West and the East. It is pointed out by Chinua Achebe in "An Image of Africa", "the novel portrays Africans as a prehistoric mass of frenzied, howling, incomprehensible barbarians: "Africa [is a] setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor" (Tyson, 2006: 428). During the journey, Marlow, the narrator of the novel, observes not only the brutality of imperialism but also the poor and miserable situation of the natives "as the standard of savagery" (Tyson, 2006: 428). In the novel, the Europeans engaged in trade with the local Africans with the aim of advancing their own interests. Although the colonisers first espouse the ideals of promoting education, religion, and development, they eventually see the untapped potential of these antiquated territories and go on a venture to procure ivory. Kurtz who is "a first-class agent" (Conrad, 1989: 22), becomes so much obsessed with ivory that he rejects to leave Africa and returns to Europe and he forgets totally about his mission because in his mind there is no sign of soft feeling for the native Africans. The novel depicts the ferocity that was imposed on the native Africans by the colonisers and presented the Africans as 'other' but the shocking thing is that the Africans do not know "what moment (their) inferiority comes into being through the other" (Fanon, 1952: 110). In addition to being the 'other' and thereby deprived of power, native Africans are transformed into outsiders and they have no choice. They become "being for others" (Fanon, 1952: 109) and have to work for intruders. Marlow witnesses the indigenous people constructing a railway, and he notes that "all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking" (Conrad, 1989: 19). The indigenous African population in this region is subjected to severe mistreatment and inhumane oppression. Insufficient provision of food is seen even in their case. Consequently, the individuals experienced a gradual decline in health, rendering them debilitated and ineffective, ultimately being granted permission to retreat and recuperate. The presence of blackness, sickness, and mortality serves to illustrate that the colonisers have indeed introduced a figurative darkness into the realm of reality under the guise of enlightenment and they don't give "sufficient attention" (Fanon, 1952: 109) to these facts because they cannot "understand the being of the black man" (Fanon, 1952: 110) as the black people "must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon, 1952: 110).

At the Outer Station, when Marlow encounters a white man, he is delighted seeing the civilized dress up of him and he says, "I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots" (Conrad, 1989: 21). Being a representative of colonizers, Marlow "believed that only their own Anglo-European culture was civilized, sophisticated . . . (because) their technology was more highly advanced" (Tyson, 2006: 419) and so he "shook hands with this (white) miracle" (Conrad, 1989: 21) and it is discovered that this white man holds the position of chief accountant inside the Company. On the contrary, Marlow represents the native African people as "black", "eyeballs glistening", "bodies streamed with perspiration", "faces like grotesque masks" (Conrad, 1989: 17), "black and naked, moved about like ants" (Conrad, 1989: 18). In this way, Marlow defined the native

peoples as “savage, backward, and undeveloped (Tyson, 2006: 419). Natives are savage that means they are “other and, therefore, not fully human” (Tyson, 2006: 420). Thus, through the fictitious narrator, Conrad has separated “what is non-white, non-Western, and non-Judeo-Christian from the acceptable and designated Western ethos (Said, 1994: 31). Actually, the Europeans view themselves as the embodiment of proper ‘self’ and the native people are regarded as ‘other’.

Conrad's literary work, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), portrays a pessimistic depiction of the African region and its indigenous population. The author demonstrates that native Africans are characterised by a lack of education, poverty, and primitiveness, hence suggesting a perceived need for their governance and development, which is seen to be the responsibility of Europeans. This is why; many European communities start controlling the native Africans with their new technology and use them as their slaves. Systematically enslavement of the entire population of the country reflects the dehumanization of the enlightened Europeans. In the novel, Native Africans are not allowed to communicate with Marlow rather they are represented by him. Marlow meets many Africans and he describes them according to his personal visualization. He uses many insignificant words to portray Africans like “black figure”, “nigger”, “pitiless”, “savage” etc. This representation indicates that they are the subject of the study of the Europeans. Again, when the natives speak, their language is not clear. So, the colonizers think that it is their duty to research the orient people. The colonisers thought that Africa is a mysterious country. Marlow describes the most bizarre image of the black cannibals who work in his steamboat. These cannibals are hungry because their hippo meat throws out of the ship because of odor pollution. They are so restraint that they do not attack on the white people. Many critics raised a question whether there was cannibalism in Africa or it is a mysterious depiction of the colonisers. Actually, misrepresentation is the technique of justifying European colonialism. Conrad not only represents the African people but also, he takes the duty of projecting the African region. In doing so he creates a dichotomy between the Congo River and The Thames River. He shows that the Thames River is the symbol of civilization. On the other hand, the Congo River is the symbol of darkness and violent in nature. Conrad presents African jungle negatively stating, “The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist” (Conrad, 1989: 16). He observes primitiveness everywhere to symbolize advanced intellectual ability of the Western people. Another aspect that contributes to the dehumanisation is the absence of proper names among the indigenous population. They are addressed as black, savage, and nigger. According to Conrad, Mr. Kurtz was a polite man but because of living with the savage Africans, he becomes degenerated and hostile and mad. According to Lois Tyson, “colonialist ideology [...] was based on the colonizers’ assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded” (Tyson, 2006: 419). Furthermore, the story centres on the indigenous African population's way of life, but narrated by the perspective of a European man. Due to cultural variations, it is necessary to challenge the criticism regarding the appropriate presentation of the native Africans. Hence, the concept of African identity may be seen as a construct shaped by the narrative of the coloniser. The indigenous inhabitants of Africa consistently experience disruptions to their tranquil existence due to the interference of colonisers, resulting in an ambiguous and precarious social standing as the “other.” In reality, indigenous communities are often distinguished by their cultural simplicity, yet in the perspective of the colonisers, they are often seen as savage.

#### **Ambiguity and Critique of Imperialism in the novel.**

Despite its problematic representations, *Heart of Darkness* does not offer a straightforward endorsement of imperialism. Marlow's journey reveals the brutal realities behind the supposed civilizing mission. European agents are depicted as greedy, violent, and hypocritical. Kurtz's descent into madness exposes the thin veneer of European morality when removed from metropolitan scrutiny.

The novella's dark portrayal of imperialism anticipates later critiques by figures like Frantz Fanon, who emphasized the dehumanizing violence at the core of colonial domination. Marlow's growing disillusionment and the final irony of Kurtz's dying words—"The horror! The horror!"—suggest that the true "darkness" lies not in Africa, but in the hearts of the European colonizers.

This ambiguity complicates the novel's politics of representation. *Heart of Darkness* critiques imperial ideology while still operating within its discursive frameworks. As Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, Conrad reveals the cruelty of empire but remains trapped within its cultural assumptions. Africa serves as a canvas for European self-reflection, rather than as a world with its own intrinsic value and agency.

### Conclusion

The politics of representation in *Heart of Darkness* are marked by profound tension. Conrad exposes the moral bankruptcy of imperialism, yet replicates many of its representational injustices. Africa is portrayed as a passive, voiceless entity, instrumental to European narratives of discovery and disillusionment. The novel's legacy thus remains deeply ambivalent: it is both a searing indictment of colonial brutality and a text that participates in the symbolic domination of the colonized.

An analysis of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) from a postcolonial perspective reveals the portrayal of Africa's enduring anguish and affliction as a consequence of European colonialism. The story focuses primarily on the ethical dilemmas that arise as a result of European colonisation of Africa. In conclusion, the dichotomy between "civilisation and savagery" emerges as a major theme and raises a significant problem in this work of fiction. Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), presents a critical examination of the conventional ideals upheld by white civilization and questions the legitimacy of imposing these ideals upon ostensibly "primitive" societies under the guise of a "civilising mission." Conrad also portrays the so-called civilised whites as rapacious monsters that battle it out for control of the 'backward' people of the world by sucking their blood. They are particularly fascinated by the natives' wealth, particularly their ivory. After all, the story centers on the colonisers' persecution of the locals and their imperialistic avarice, as well as the stark contrast between what the civilised white people say they believe in and the actions they really take. Ultimately, Marlow reveals the pervasive presence of evil that extends beyond the supposedly civilised white people to include the black population residing in the Dark Continent. West is portrayed in the book as the "Self" and East as the "Other." Above all, in addressing the ethnocentric cultural representations of the "other," the novella mainly and unwittingly depends on how Europeans see the aboriginal people as a conventional "savage." One of the most significant responsibilities played by European authors is the construction of an African identity. In the work, black people are portrayed as barbarians, lethargic, harsh, uneducated, reticent, and uncivilised, reflecting the distinctions between civilization and barbarism. On the contrary, white objects and people are portrayed as symbols of civilization. Therefore, the issue of whether Conrad is a "racist" or not is called into question by his critical insight in using "savagery" as a metaphor for the hierarchical link between Europe and Africa. Understanding these contradictions is essential to any nuanced reading of *Heart of Darkness*. The novella's enduring relevance lies not only in its literary brilliance but also in its embodiment of the

complex entanglements of culture, power, and representation that continue to shape global discourse

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