

Unveiling the Shadows of Empire: Ideological Critique, Propaganda, and the Modernist Encounter in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*



Inayat Ur Rehman	M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English, Qurtuba University of Science and Information Technology. thecouncil345@gmail.com
Fayyaz Ahmad Khan	M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English, Qurtuba University of Science and Information Technology. fayyazkhan096@gmail.com
Saima Jalaisha Qaiser	BS English, City University of Science and Information Technology. jalaishajehan@gmail.com
Azmat Ali Khan (Corresponding Author)	M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English, Qurtuba University of Science and Information Technology, Azmatalikhan288@gmail.com

Abstract: *This research study categorically delves into the ideological underpinnings of Joseph Conrad's modernist discourse, Heart of Darkness, leveling a withering critique against the imperialist enterprise primarily driven by a well-crafted ideology and the modernist encounter. Close reading and the postcolonial theory have been strategically employed within a qualitative framework to unveil the intractable complexities giving an impetus to the narrative structure of this modernist discourse, determining power dynamics, and cultural encounter. The core objective of this research study is to unveil the ideological underpinnings of Heart of Darkness, unmasking how this modernist text critiques imperialism, propaganda, and modernist encounter. This research study's findings persuasively lay bare the fact that imperialist ideology and propaganda enterprise are tactically empowered to impose its grim realities upon the Congolese. Furthermore, it also demeans and challenges the dominant imperialist propaganda and the cherry-picked stereotypes — willfully employed to dehumanize the very existence of the colonized. This research study provides valuable insights into a deeper comprehension of the Heart of Darkness, unmasking the enduring significance for current discourse, encircling power, identity, and cultures.*

Keywords: Heart of Darkness, Ideological Critique, Subverting Propaganda, Unmasking the Horror, Deconstruction of Mission Civilisatrice, and Modernist Encounter

Introduction

Set in the enigmatic Africa of the nineteenth century *Heart of Darkness* is the tale of Marlow, a captain of a river steamboat of an ivory trading company. As he travels up the Congo River, Marlow, hears about a Mr. Kurtz, an Ivory trader, who holds godly sway over the locals. Finally, he reaches the Kurtz's station and finds himself at the heart of corruption at a most unlikely place among a most primitive and innocent people.

The most celebrated of Conrad's works *Heart of*

Darkness is an elegy of human existence under imperialism. Its repercussions remains the same even after over hundred years of its first publication (Conard, 2017).

Heart of Darkness, a seminal work, primarily tracing its literary essence to the modernist literature, leveling a scathing critique against the imperialist ideology — hell-bent on dominating the unwary Congolese, entrapping them into its tentacles to subjugate it to its hegemonic values, norms, and ideologies. This magnum opus novella categorically unveils the *darkness* at the

very core of European colonialism. It also brings forth Conrad's blistering critique levelled against the dark and manipulative facets of the despicable imperialist ideology, exposing vividly how this enterprise strategically employed propaganda and tactically maneuvered ideology to extirpate the very ancestral legacy and the traditional roots of the unwary Congolese.

Imperialist ideology in the *Heart of Darkness*

Contextually speaking, Joseph Conrad has maneuvered a mordant critique against the imperialist ideology – hell-bent on eroding the traditional roots of the Congolese, subjecting them to the Western superior race. Not only has he leveled a pungent critique against the colonizers but also the colonized, unveiling the merciless repercussions unleashed by the Colonizers to superimpose their identity and to eradicate Congolese social integrity. This guileful ideology was strategically employed by the Colonizers as a moral justification to infuse enlightenment, glorifying it as a legitimization of exploitation. Kurtz, a charismatic and a discerning individual has been symbolized as an imperial ideologue, representing and espousing the western paradigms of superiority, colonialism, and the civilizing mission. Despite valorizing these hegemonic western paradigms, Kurtz's charismatic persona is entrapped in the vicious tentacles of power corruption and colonialism. Espousing this evil ideology of imperialism, Kurtz employs a repertoire of *modus operandi*, viz. dehumanization of colonized Congolese, employing insidious propaganda, and manipulation – shaping public opinion and provides a valid ground to justify his actions accompanied by the merciless enforcement of Western culture and identities, destroying indigenous culture, and the corruption of individuals.

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much.”

This line in a crystal-clear way brings forth the darker facet of imperialism, unveiling

exploitation and racism inherent in the colonizers practices.

Conrad's *Modus Operandi* – Critiquing Imperialist Ideology

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was initially published in 1899 amidst the *High Age of Imperialism*, occurring from 1870 to 1918. Albeit valorized as an age of Imperialism, it invited substantial critique from a circle of intellectuals, considering it as an *evil*, striking deeply at the very roots of the colonized cultures. Negating this fascist nature of imperialism, Conrad has employed a repertoire of strategies critiquing this evil ideology:

1. He unveiled the merciless nature of colonialism.
2. He challenged the racial superiority valorized by the Westerners.
3. Dispelling the myth of *Mission Civilisatrice*.

Propaganda in the shadows of Imperialism in the *Heart of Darkness*

Literally speaking, propaganda implies ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause. In the same vein, Joseph Conrad has maneuvered a scathing critique on this mischievous propaganda spewed by the Imperialist machinery with an objective to open a new ground for justifying colonialism and imperialism. This propaganda was given an impetus by the imperialists, shaping public opinion to justify the legitimization of exploitation of the colonized Congolese.

Propaganda ushered in colonial era was tactically whittled to justify imperialist's actions and to shape public opinion, masquerading as the *beacon of enlightenment*. Conrad sardonically exposes these vicious tactics to defame and obscure the brutal realities of colonialism. Colonizers had employed these propagandas: rhetoric of civilization, myth of *Dark Continent*, and dehumanization of colonized people, drastically ruined the historical reality of the Africans.

Marlow, the narrator of Joseph Conrad's

novella, *Heart of darkness*, has painstakingly highlighted the indispensability of the Imperialism as a historical process via the colonizers kept imposing their hegemonic values and ideologies upon the impoverished inhabitants of the colonized territories. This process has been vividly described by Marlow after he narrates the Kurtz's story.

Imperialism — a contingent historical process

Imperialism implies the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other territories.

'...late nineteenth-century imperialism was constituted through and legitimized by a set of complex discourses that eroticized others and positioned European states as better than and often obligated to "assist" those others through political, cultural, and economic intervention.' (Mona Domosh).

Contextually speaking, Joseph Conrad has masterfully brought this point home, exposing imperialism as an inevitable historical process primarily sustained by chaotic and the hypocritical system, unlocking greed, exploitation, moral corruption, exposing these brutal realities lurking beneath the veneer of civilizing rhetoric. It tacitly portrays the natural and predestined sprawl of civilization albeit a violent and dynamic enterprise. Colonialism has been critiqued as a destructive imperial venture clearly reflected in the company operation launched in Congo, and are marked by inefficiency, absurdity, and cruelty.

Hypocrisy encoded in the very nature of *civilizing mission* has been sarcastically denounced in the very discourse of Conrad, critiquing the imperialist venture, responsibly sabotaging the ancestral dynamics of the African culture. This prudent civilizing rhetoric of bringing light surrendering darkness to the enlightenment echoed in the character of Kurtz and the company is undercut by the reality of exploitation, slavery, and genocide. The *Whited sepulcher* of Brussels symbolizes the moral depravity and hollowness of the imperial justification hailing imperialism is a product of

human avarice and delusion. This novel tacitly dismantles the enlightenment doctrine, overtly and covertly hell-bent on imposing its imperial agenda on the colonized.

In historical context, imperialism has been stigmatized by the colonized as an *evil* venture, tactically maneuvered by the imperialist elites to expand their hegemony over the susceptible territories, draining them from their economic resources and gaining racial superiority. A shoal of propaganda tactics were strategically employed to denigrating the fragile status of the native Africans. *Civilizing mission* was projected as a benevolent effort to civilize or modernize other territories. Besides civilizing mission, nationalism was employed to appeal to the national pride and interest. Racism and xenophobia accompanied by denigrating stereotypes were employed to portray and dehumanize other cultures as inferior, lowborn, and threatening (Teng, 2000).

Racist ideologies and views, the imperative and subversive dimensions of the imperialist agenda, have been vividly portrayed by Conrad in his literary masterpiece *Heart of Darkness*. Generally speaking, racism and discrimination were employed on part of the Imperialist representative, Kurtz, to protect both political and economic interests. The essence of these can be found in Conrad's depiction of Africans as savages and cannibals, giving an added impetus to the dehumanizing racist stereotypes.

"They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces." (pg. 67).

Racist power corridors technically employed a plethora of ideologies in order to disempower other races, making them less human. White races kept challenging the superiority of non-white races. Imperialism, a grand exploitative enterprise, in reality, was a cut-throating competition for trade and power dominance (Sharmin, 2018).

Imperialism, having been a historical complex, literally describes the infusion and the spread of the capitalist system into a non-capitalist or a primitive capitalist area of the world. Generally, *Heart of Darkness* meticulously criticizes the hollowness or the evil of 20th twentieth century

life overshadowed by the evil of imperialism. It records and encloses a moment of discursive crises in the ideological mission of liberal imperialism. Conrad's paradigmatic character, Kurtz, a tragic genius, represents a *black hole* in the orderly progress of Europe's *mission civilisatrice* (Collits, 1989).

The prophetic strength enmeshed in this modernist text explicitly brings forth the demonized imagery of imperialism. Joseph Conrad has cast an acidic aspersion on the notion of imperialism's dark underbelly spewing brutality and exploitation. This text can also posit the human darkness carried through the colonialism legacy. The prophetic significance of this discourse is giving a clear cut warning about the unchecked power and the importance of the unaccountability.

Eschatological tone focuses on the propaganda and imperialist ideology via Conrad critiques the way imperialists employs propaganda to justify their ruthless actions, often masquerading them as a civilizing mission. This modernist text explores the idea that darkness is not just external (in the form of colonials) but also internal (within human nature) (Wollaeger, 2005).

In the high age of imperialism spanning from 1870 to 1918, ideology was substantially espoused by the British public in order to gain wealth and power. Joseph Chamberlain, secretary of state for the colonies between 1895 and 1903, offered a concise and valid outline of this ideology in his 1897 speech delivered at the annual dinner of the Royal colonial institute, where he described Britain imperial activity as strategic attempt to redeem districts as large as Europe from barbarians and the superstitions in which they had been steeped for centuries. Imperialists argued that we are giving native people *gain to humanity* by supporting them to develop more western sense of civilization. Chinua Achebe has rightly said that Conrad is a thoroughgoing racist, portraying Africa as primitive land, and the Congolese as inhuman and animalistic. To make it more badly, he has denigrated Congolese as wilderness and dwelling in the prehistoric earth (Human, 2015).

Many postcolonial intellectuals have sarcastically denigrated imperialism as a venomous ideology driven by domination. It was cleverly incorporated to dominate the colonized psyche and to go straight after the territorial annexation, respectively (Panda, Imperialism in Joseph Conrad "The Heart of Darkness").

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Imperialist undertakings were accompanied by the aggressive imperial rhetoric, justifying colonial exploitation on the ground of the inferiority of the African lower race. Africa is a place where savagery ruled supreme (Schnauder, 2005).

Espousing the prudent remarks given by an erudite postcolonial theorist, Chinua Achebe, it can be inferred that the notion of disillusionment of civilization has been a rampant and pervasive motif in this novella, infusing the false notion of enlightenment. As Marlow journeys into the Congo, he witnesses these horrendous treatment of Congolese on part of the European Colonizers, dismantling his illusion about the benevolence of western civilization. This disillusionment compels Marlow to confront the contradictions of imperialism and the true nature of humanity.

“....the colonialist are the devil that makes Africa into an earthly hell”

The fundamental notion of *Eurocentric vision* can be clearly reflected in this text, portraying Africa and its dwellers via the lens of exoticism and primitivism. This discourse literally reinforces the denigrating stereotypes of African savagery and inferiority, while European characters are depicted as civilized and rational, keeping Congolese as tools for their capitalist ventures (Rehman, 2025).

Discussion and Interpretation.

Joseph Conrad's groundbreaking modernist

fiction, *Heart of Darkness*, categorically casts a damning aspersion on the underlying values glorified by the imperialist elites at the cost of dismantling the cultural and intellectual capital of the Congolese. This section of research article broadly explores the ways via Conrad has masterfully unmasked the shadows of empire, introspecting the ideological critique, propaganda, and modernist encounter, shaping the societal narratives. This modernist fiction has been hailed as a controversial text. On the one hand, it categorically levels a scathing criticism against the imperial enterprise, predominantly imposing its hegemonic values upon the colonized while on the other hand, it duly promotes and espouses the Eurocentric notion of accepting and glorifying the Western superiority. Imperialism through its suppressive tactics using its ideological contour dehumanizes both colonizers and the colonized. This can be reflected in Kurtz's character as tragic genius, confirming to the fact that the great white man was corrupted by the darkness. The notion of *Eurocentrism* has been incorporated implicitly by Conrad through his well-crafted narratives, assuming its superiority confirming to the fact that even this enlightenment project and enterprise has a dark side, legitimizing its atrocious and dominating actions and influences upon the Congolese – the colonized.

Deconstructing the civilizing mission.

Hypocrisy encoded in the very nature of 'civilizing mission' has been sarcastically denounced in the very discourse of Conrad, critiquing the imperial venture, responsibly sabotaging the ancestral dynamics of the African culture. This well-thought-out civilizing rhetoric of bringing light surrendering darkness into the enlightenment echoed in the character of Kurtz and the company is undercut by the reality of exploitation slavery and genocide. The *Whited sepulcher* of Brussels symbolizes the moral depravity and hollowness of the imperial justification imperialism is a product of human avarice and delusion. This novel tacitly dismantles the enlightenment doctrine, overtly and covertly hell-bent on imposing its imperial agenda on the susceptible and suppressed.

In historical context, imperialism has been hailed as an evil venture, tactically maneuvered by the imperialist to expand their hegemony over the susceptible territories draining them from their economic resources, and gaining cultural superiority. A shoal of propaganda tactics were strategically employed – *civilizing mission* – maneuvered as a benevolent effort to civilize or modernize other territories. Besides civilizing mission, nationalism was employed to appeal to the national pride and interest. Racism and xenophobia, stereotyping were to portray and dehumanize other cultures as inferior or threatening.

Hypocrisy of the civilizing mission categorically reflects this fact that this mission was driven by greed, power, and desire for domination. Imperialist power kept using propaganda, justifying their insidious actions, highlighting this undisputable fact that how language and ideology are used to denigrate and mask the brutal realities of the imperialist, creating a strategic narrative to dominate and legitimizes their heinous actions.

The power of language

Language has played an integral role in molding perceptions, concealing truth, exerting power, and revealing the character's role in this modernist discourse. One strategic applicability of the language in this modernist text is the imperialist rhetoric convincingly justifies colonialism, reinforced by the symbolic language, adding new literary fragrance to the recurring motifs. Marlow's narrative voice meticulously shapes our comprehension and persuasively challenges the dominant assumptions, spotlighting languages limitations. The dominant ideological language is cogently used to dehumanize both the colonized and the colonizers.

Unmasking the Horror

'Unveiling the shadows of empire' or 'Unmasking the horror' in the groundbreaking modernist text, *Heart of Darkness*, created by Anglophone novelist and a modernist writer, Joseph Conrad, scrutinizes a dichotomy between the merciless nature of imperialism and its dehumanizing logic, subjugating the Congolese

to its imposing values. This modernist discourse technically dispels the myth of mission civilisatrice, spewing greed, violence, and ratchets up the phenomenon of moral depravity. The hypocritical facet of this imperial enterprise can be explicitly reflected in Kurtz's descent into abysmal madness _ metamorphosed into a savage and inhuman, symbolizing the despicable and demeaning nature of imperialism. The final words of Mr. Kurtz were: "The horror! The horror! "

These weird words clearly convey Kurtz's realization of the darkness nurturing within himself and the vicious atrocities committed on his part amidst his colonial sojourn in Congo.

Final thought: Chinua Achebe, a postcolonial theorist, in his groundbreaking text, "An image of Africa" (1975) had rightly maneuvered a damning critique, mislabeling Conrad's novel as utterly racist, suppressing African traditional narratives _ striking deep at the very fabric of their ancestral legacy.

Last but not the least, this novel categorically illuminates the abyss, uncovering the dark sordid underbelly of imperialist ideology and the savage realities of enforced domination and exploitation.

Conclusion.

Heart of Darkness, a groundbreaking modernist fiction, created by Joseph Conrad, a modernist writer and Anglophone novelist, tactically levels a scathing critique against the imperial master plan, armed tooth-and-nail in the garb of enlightenment, masterfully reflects and dovetails ideological critique, propaganda, and modernist encounter. These archetypical dimensions are tacitly unearthing the intricacies inextricably coalescing with imperialism _ determining power dynamics, societal narratives, and shaping one's identity. Moreover, it convincingly critiques the imperialists' ruthless ambition; explicitly exposing the sordid and the venomous underbelly of western hegemonic vision, mercilessly operating in the garb of mission civilisatrice. This novel also cast a damning aspersion on the ideological underpinnings and

the warp and woof of imperialism, employing its unsavory tactics masquerading as ideological manipulation and malicious propaganda mislabeling Congolese as primitive, exotic, mysterious, and savages, setting the stage for imposing their hegemonic values upon the colonized. Conrad has cogently unearthed the despicable nature of imperialist propaganda and ideology _ striking irreparably at the very roots of the Congolese culture, leading to a cobweb of de-personalization, desensitization, and detraditionalization.

Last but not the least, Joseph Conrad has strategically labelled Imperialism as a venomous propaganda, strategically maneuvered by the imperialist elites to give a strategic impetus to the legitimization of their colonial encroachment, inculcating a sense a sense of disillusionment in the very psyche of the Congolese.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge the valuable support of the editorial committee of this publication, and in particular, Prof. Dr. Atta Ullah Jan, Qurtaba University of Science and Information Technology, Peshawar, for extending his generous intellectual support and guidance throughout this research endeavor.

Thanks also go to the Journal proofreading committee for extending their invaluable guidance in finalizing and approving our research paper.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. This research hasn't received any specific funding from any agency in public, commercial, and not-for-profit organization.

Additionally, the authors have no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the research findings. All concerned data and materials employed in this research study are properly cited and referenced. The authors are responsible for the content and clarity of this research article.

Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

Competing interests

The authors claim no competing interests.

Dedication

“To my caring parents, whose unflinching love and support have been the ultimate guiding forces behind my every successful endeavor.”

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