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## **Language, Power, and Colonial Representation in *Heart of Darkness*: A Postcolonial Reading**

**Girish S. Bendke**

### **Abstract:**

This paper studies *Heart of Darkness* from a postcolonial point of view by showing how language is used as a tool of colonial power rather than as a neutral way of telling a story. By looking at narrative voice, representation, and silence, the paper argues that the novella creates imperial authority by controlling who can speak and who cannot. Even though Conrad seems to criticize European imperialism, the text still supports colonial ideas by denying African characters independent voices and inner thoughts. Using postcolonial ideas about representation and silence, the paper shows how Africa is shown as a symbolic place and Africans as images, sounds, and bodies instead of full human beings. By focusing on language as a form of power, this study argues that *Heart of Darkness* supports colonial thinking even while exposing its cruelty. The paper concludes that reading classic English texts through a postcolonial lens helps reveal how literature quietly supports colonial power.

**Keywords:** *Heart of Darkness*, Postcolonial Reading, Language and Power, Colonial Discourse, Representation, Silence, Narrative Authority, Imperial Ideology.

### **Introduction**

Published in 1899, *Heart of Darkness* is an important text in English literature. It is often read as a criticism of European imperialism because it shows the violence, greed, and moral failure behind the so called civilizing mission of the British Empire. The story is set in the Belgian Congo during

the colonial period and follows Marlow's journey into Africa, where he meets Kurtz, a man who represents the extreme form of imperial ambition and moral collapse. However, even while criticizing colonialism, the novella is still shaped by colonial ideas. This creates an important question: can a text written from within an imperial system truly challenge that system?

Postcolonial criticism helps us answer this question by focusing on language and representation rather than only on moral themes. Colonial rule was not maintained only through physical violence. It was also supported through language and storytelling. European writers often described colonized lands as dark, backward, and in need of control. English literature played a major role in shaping how Europeans viewed non European societies. Because of this, language becomes a form of power that shapes meaning and controls how people and places are understood. This paper argues that in *Heart of Darkness*, language is not neutral. It works as a tool of colonial authority. Through Marlow's narration, the story decides who is important and who is ignored. European characters are allowed to speak, think, and judge, while African characters are mostly silent and described from the outside. Even when colonial violence is shown, it is still presented through a European point of view. As a result, the text repeats colonial power structures through language.

Another important aspect of the novella is the way Africa is represented. Africa is not shown as a real place with history and culture. Instead, it is described as dark, mysterious, and timeless. This kind of description supports colonial thinking because it presents Africa as inferior and unknown. The continent becomes a background for European characters to explore their own thoughts and moral problems, while the real experiences of Africans are pushed aside.

Silence plays a key role in the text. African characters appear many times, but they rarely speak. They are shown mainly as bodies, movements, or sounds rather than as thinking individuals. This

silence reflects a form of power where colonized people are denied the ability to represent themselves. Because Africans do not speak for themselves, Europeans control how their lives and experiences are described.

Marlow's role as the storyteller also strengthens colonial authority. His voice sounds thoughtful and self critical, which makes readers trust him. However, he never questions his right to describe and judge Africa. While he criticizes imperial methods, he does not challenge Europe's power to define Africa. This control over storytelling becomes another way colonial power is maintained.

This paper uses a postcolonial approach to study how language, power, and representation work in *Heart of Darkness*. Instead of judging Conrad as a person, it examines how the text itself supports colonial ideas. By studying narration, description, and silence, the paper shows that the novella helps maintain imperial power even while exposing its violence. This reading is important because *Heart of Darkness* is still taught as a major literary text. A postcolonial approach helps students question not only colonialism in the story, but also the role of English literature in supporting empire.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Many postcolonial critics have studied *Heart of Darkness* by focusing on the link between language, power, and imperialism. Earlier critics often praised the novella as a strong attack on European imperialism. However, postcolonial scholars have taken a different approach. Instead of asking whether Conrad personally opposed empire, they examine how the text itself works within colonial ways of thinking. This section explains the theoretical ideas used in this study, mainly drawn from the work of Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

One of the key ideas for this study comes from Edward Said and his theory of colonial discourse. In *Orientalism*, Said explains that imperial power is not maintained only through armies or money.

It is also maintained through language and cultural stories. These stories describe colonized people as inferior, backward, and unchanging. Literature plays an important role in spreading these ideas. From this point of view, literary texts do not simply describe reality. They help create a version of reality that supports imperial control.

When Said's ideas are applied to *Heart of Darkness*, it becomes clear that Africa is not shown as a real place with history and culture. Instead, it is presented as the opposite of Europe. Africa is described again and again as dark, mysterious, and primitive. These descriptions make Africa appear unknowable and timeless, while Europe is shown as rational and knowledgeable. Even when the novel criticizes imperial violence, it still uses language that reduces Africa to a simple and negative image. Said's theory helps us see that the text both criticizes empire and also supports it at the same time.

Said also points out Conrad's mixed attitude toward imperialism. While *Heart of Darkness* shows the moral emptiness of colonialism, its focus remains on European disappointment rather than African suffering. Africa mainly serves as a background for the mental and moral breakdown of European characters. This kind of criticism does not truly challenge colonial ideas because Europe remains at the center of the story. This insight is important for this study because it shows how imperial power can continue even in texts that seem critical.

Along with Said's ideas, this study also uses Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory, which focuses on voice, silence, and representation. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak argues that colonial systems silence colonized people by keeping them out of knowledge and speech. She calls this process epistemic violence. Because of this, the voices and experiences of colonized people are either distorted or completely erased. Even texts that claim to speak for the oppressed often continue domination by not allowing them to speak for themselves.

Spivak's ideas are especially useful when reading *Heart of Darkness*. African characters appear often in the novella, but they rarely speak. They are not shown thinking or reflecting. Instead, they are described through their bodies, movements, sounds, or as part of a group. This silence is not accidental. It reflects the unequal power relationship of colonialism. Meaning in the text is created only through European voices, mainly Marlow's, whose authority as narrator is never seriously questioned.

Spivak also highlights the problem of narration. In *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is shown only through European storytellers. This gives the impression of deep reflection, but it also keeps strict control over meaning. Africans never get the chance to describe their own lives. Everything is filtered through colonial language. This structure clearly shows how colonial texts prevent the subaltern from speaking, even when they appear to criticize empire.

Together, the theories of Said and Spivak provide a strong base for studying *Heart of Darkness*. Said's idea of colonial discourse helps explain how Africa is shaped by imperial language, while Spivak's focus on silence reveals who controls the story. Using these theories, this study treats the novella not just as a moral criticism of colonialism, but as a text that still takes part in imperial thinking. This approach helps reveal how language works as a quiet but powerful tool of domination in the narrative

### **Language as an Instrument of Imperial Power in *Heart of Darkness***

In *Heart of Darkness*, language is not neutral. It does more than describe places and events. It creates meaning in a way that supports imperial power. Through storytelling, metaphors, and selective description, the language of the novella presents Europe as powerful and knowledgeable,

while Africa is shown as passive, unclear, and inferior. This section explains how language works as a tool of imperial control and helps create unequal power relationships in the text.

One of the strongest signs of language based power in the novella is the narrative voice. The story is told almost entirely through Marlow. He is presented as thoughtful and morally serious, which makes readers trust him. However, many of his descriptions are shaped by colonial thinking. Marlow speaks as someone who explains Africa rather than as someone who belongs to it. Early in the story, he describes Africa as a “blank” space on the map. This idea ignores Africa’s history and culture and presents it as empty and ready to be controlled. Calling Africa “blank” does not describe reality. It creates an image that supports imperial expansion.

Language also shows imperial power through abstraction. Africa is rarely described as a real place with people, traditions, or social life. Instead, it is shown through unclear images of darkness, silence, and disorder. Marlow describes the African land as something powerful and mysterious, almost like an idea rather than a real place. While this may sound critical of imperialism, it actually turns Africa into a symbol instead of a lived human space. Meaning is shifted away from African life and placed within European thinking.

This abstract image is strengthened by repeated metaphors that link Africa with darkness and lack of reason. In the novella, darkness is not just physical. It represents confusion and moral uncertainty. By constantly connecting Africa with darkness, the text creates an opposition where Europe stands for reason and Africa stands for the unknown. This way of thinking matches colonial ideas, where the colonized world is shown as meaningless until Europeans explain it.

Language is also used to hide and justify colonial violence. Harm and exploitation are often described in soft or indirect words. Marlow refers to imperial work as “civilizing” even though he sees cruelty and suffering around him. This difference between the language of progress and the

reality of violence shows the hypocrisy of imperialism. However, the text does not fully reject this language. Instead, it shows how imperial power depends on words that hide violence behind moral sounding ideas.

Kurtz clearly shows how language and power are connected. He is praised mainly for his ability to speak well. Marlow calls him a “remarkable man” because of his powerful voice and persuasive language. Kurtz writes about progress and enlightenment in his report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Yet this ideal language ends with the violent line, “Exterminate all the brutes!” This contrast shows how empty and dangerous imperial language can be. Still, Kurtz’s authority comes from his words, not his actions. This proves that colonial power is closely tied to control over language.

African characters are mostly kept out of this world of language. European characters speak, write, and interpret, but Africans are denied meaningful speech. When Africans are shown speaking, their words are often reduced to noise or short sounds that carry no importance. Marlow describes their voices as shouting and clapping, turning communication into meaningless sound. This supports the colonial idea that Africans are outside reason and need Europeans to speak for them.

Even when Africans are shown with sympathy, language keeps them distant. Marlow describes sick workers as “black shadows,” which creates pity but removes individuality. These people are turned into images instead of full human beings. Their suffering becomes important only because it affects Marlow’s thoughts. Language here makes pain look poetic rather than real.

Through narrative control, metaphor, abstraction, and silence, *Heart of Darkness* shows how language supports imperial power. The novella points out the moral problems of empire, but it does so using a language that still favors European voices. By deciding who can speak and whose meaning matters, the text keeps colonial hierarchies alive. In this way, language becomes one of

the strongest tools of imperial domination, shaping both how the world is described and how it is imagined.

### **Representation of Africa and Africans: Dehumanization and Othering**

In *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is not shown as a real place with people, culture, and history. Instead, it is presented as a symbolic setting where European characters explore their own thoughts and fears. Africa and Africans are represented through colonial ideas, using language that turns human beings into images, bodies, and symbols. This way of representation supports imperial power because it makes domination seem natural and unquestionable.

From the start of the novel, Africa is described using images of emptiness and strangeness. Marlow often describes the land as dark, mysterious, and difficult to understand. He says that traveling into Africa feels like going back to the beginning of the world. This idea places Africa in the distant past and removes it from modern history. As a result, Europe appears modern and progressive, while Africa is shown as backward and unchanged. This denies Africans a sense of history and development.

African characters in the novel are rarely shown as individuals. They usually appear in groups and are not given names, personal stories, or inner thoughts. Marlow uses general terms like “savages” and “natives,” which ignore differences between people. Even when Africans are present, they are described mainly through their bodies, movements, and sounds. Their thoughts and emotions are ignored. This shows a colonial way of seeing, where colonized people are treated as objects instead of thinking human beings.

A clear example of this dehumanization appears when Marlow describes African workers who are dying near the company station. He calls them “black shadows” suffering from disease and hunger.

Although the scene shows pain, the language removes their identity. By calling them shadows, the novel turns real people into images. Their suffering matters only because it affects Marlow, not because their lives are important on their own.

Language also plays an important role in silencing Africans. African characters rarely speak in the novel. When they do, their voices are shown as unclear or animal like sounds. Marlow describes hearing shouting and drums from the forest, presenting African communication as noise rather than language. This supports the colonial belief that Africans are not capable of rational speech and therefore need Europeans to speak for them. By denying Africans speech, the novel also denies them thought and authority.

Even when an African character speaks briefly, their voice is quickly ignored. The African helmsman is one of the few who speaks directly to Marlow. However, after his death, he is quickly forgotten and becomes part of Marlow's thoughts about life and civilization. His voice does not help readers understand African experience. Instead, it only serves Marlow's personal reflection. This shows how African presence is always less important than European self understanding.

Africa itself is often shown as dangerous and threatening. Marlow describes the land as watching, hostile, and powerful enough to corrupt Europeans. The jungle is shown as alive and frightening. This makes it seem as though Africa itself causes moral failure. Such descriptions shift attention away from colonial violence and place blame on the land rather than on imperial actions. This helps protect Europe from responsibility.

These representations clearly show the process of othering. Africa and Africans are presented as completely different and inferior to Europe. Europe is shown as the place of language, reason, and moral struggle. Africa is shown as silent, timeless, and ruled by instinct. This sharp division supports imperial ideology by suggesting that domination is necessary and unavoidable.

Although Conrad exposes the cruelty and hypocrisy of colonialism, his portrayal of Africa remains limited by colonial thinking. The novel does not allow African voices to challenge European authority. Instead, Africa exists mainly as a mirror for European fears and moral questions. Through dehumanizing language and silence, *Heart of Darkness* becomes part same system of representation that supported colonial rule.

### **Silence, Absence, and Narrative Control**

One of the most important features of *Heart of Darkness* is not only what it says about Africa and Africans, but what it does not say. Silence plays a major role in the novel. It is not accidental. Through limited viewpoints and controlled storytelling, the text decides who is allowed to speak and whose experiences matter. In this way, silence becomes a strong tool of imperial power.

The structure of the novel helps create this silence. The story is told through layers of European narrators. An unnamed narrator introduces Marlow, and Marlow tells the main story. This means that all interpretation stays within European voices. Africa is shown only through Marlow's eyes. Africans never tell their own stories. This structure gives the impression of deep reflection, but it blocks other viewpoints from appearing. Meaning is created through European thinking, not through dialogue or shared experience.

As the main narrator, Marlow controls what is described in detail and what is quickly passed over. African suffering is often mentioned briefly and then ignored. Scenes of hard labor, hunger, and death appear for a moment and then disappear. The story quickly returns to Marlow's personal thoughts. This suggests that African lives matter mainly because they affect Marlow's feelings. Silence here pushes African experience to the margins while keeping European experience at the center.

This silence can be understood using the idea of epistemic violence. Colonial systems silence colonized people by denying them the chance to speak or represent themselves. In *Heart of Darkness*, Africans are present but voiceless. They cannot explain their own lives. Their reality is known only through European interpretation. Even when the text seems sympathetic, Africans are never given control over the story.

When African speech does appear, it is reduced and distorted. Communication is often described as shouting, drumming, or chanting, not as meaningful language. This supports the colonial belief that Africans are not capable of rational speech. By showing African communication as noise, the novel justifies the need for Europeans to explain and interpret Africa. Silence becomes a way of maintaining control.

Kurtz's final words, "The horror! The horror!", show how speech is valued differently. Kurtz is allowed to speak even at the moment of death. His words are treated as deep and important. At the same time, many African deaths happen without words or explanation. They are shown only as images in the background. This difference shows how the novel gives importance to European voices while ignoring African ones.

African women are also silenced in the novel. Kurtz's African mistress is described in strong physical detail, but she never speaks. Her power is shown through her body, not through language. In contrast, Kurtz's Intended in Europe is allowed to speak and express emotion. This difference shows how the novel supports both colonial and gender hierarchies.

Silence also helps protect imperial power. By not fully showing colonial suffering, the novel avoids facing the real human cost of empire. Violence is kept distant and abstract. Readers focus on the moral struggles of European characters instead of the lives destroyed by colonialism. This makes empire seem tragic but unavoidable, rather than cruel and unjust.

Through its storytelling and control of speech, *Heart of Darkness* shows how silence works as a form of power. The absence of African voices is not accidental. It is part of colonial thinking. By deciding who can speak and whose lives matter, the novel supports European authority. This shows that imperial power is maintained not only through violence, but also through control over language, silence, and meaning.

### **Conrad's Ambivalence: Critique or Complicity?**

Any postcolonial reading of *Heart of Darkness* must deal with Conrad's position in relation to imperialism. The novel clearly shows the cruelty, greed, and moral emptiness of European empire. At the same time, it uses ideas and images that repeat colonial power structures. This creates a tension at the center of the text. Conrad criticizes empire, but his criticism is limited by the beliefs and attitudes of his time.

On one level, *Heart of Darkness* strongly attacks imperial hypocrisy. Marlow questions the idea that empire brings civilization. He describes imperial conquest as violent robbery and mass murder. These moments show that Conrad understood the damage caused by empire and did not try to glorify colonial rule. The novel also shows Europeans as cruel, inefficient, and morally weak, which challenges the idea that they are superior.

Kurtz represents the clearest criticism of imperial ambition. He comes to Africa believing in progress and enlightenment. Over time, these ideals turn into extreme violence and exploitation. His final message, "Exterminate all the brutes!", shows the true result of imperial thinking when it loses its moral cover. Through Kurtz, the novel exposes how the language of civilization can lead to extreme cruelty. This is one of the most powerful moments in the text.

However, the novel mainly focuses on European experience. It pays more attention to the mental and moral breakdown of Europeans than to the suffering of Africans. Africa is shown mainly as a place where Europeans face moral crisis. African lives, histories, and voices remain in the background. Because of this, the novel does not fully challenge the unequal relationship between colonizers and the colonized.

This limitation becomes clearer in the way moral understanding is handled. While the novel criticizes imperial violence, Africans are not allowed to express this criticism themselves. Europeans speak and judge on their behalf. This keeps the idea that Europeans have greater knowledge and authority. Even moments that seem morally aware still exclude Africans from meaningful participation.

The portrayal of Africa as a corrupting force also complicates Conrad's position. The novel sometimes suggests that the African land itself causes moral collapse. Kurtz's downfall is often linked to the wilderness instead of to colonial systems and violence. This shifts blame away from empire and places it on Africa, reinforcing the idea that the continent is dangerous or threatening. Conrad's storytelling method adds to this tension. The layered narration creates distance and moral uncertainty. While this makes the novel psychologically complex, it also weakens responsibility. Imperial violence begins to look like a tragic human problem instead of a specific historical system of exploitation. This reduces the political strength of the critique.

Recognizing this mixed position does not mean rejecting the novel. It helps us understand its limits more clearly. *Heart of Darkness* reveals the moral problems of empire, but it cannot fully escape colonial thinking. Its criticism is incomplete because it centers European experience and pushes African voices aside. This tension is why the novel still creates debate and why postcolonial readings are important.

By accepting both the novel's insights and its blind spots, this study avoids simple judgments. Conrad's work holds a complex place in colonial literature. It exposes the darkness of empire while remaining tied to its language and ideas. This contradiction is not a weakness of postcolonial criticism. It is the starting point that helps readers understand how deeply imperial power is built into literature itself.

### **Conclusion:**

This study has examined *Heart of Darkness* as a text shaped by colonial thinking, with a special focus on how language is used as a form of power. Instead of reading the novel only as a moral attack on imperialism, this paper has shown that its storytelling methods, images, and silences often support colonial hierarchies. Language in *Heart of Darkness* does not simply describe empire. It helps create and maintain imperial power.

The study has shown that control of the narrative remains with European characters. Marlow's voice dominates the story and guides how events are understood. African characters are rarely allowed to speak or express their thoughts. They are denied narrative power. This imbalance supports the colonial idea that Europeans have the right to explain and represent colonized people. Even when the novel shows sympathy, African suffering is still understood only through European perspectives.

The way Africa is represented further supports colonial thinking. Africa is shown as dark, timeless, and mysterious rather than as a real place with history and culture. It becomes a background for European moral and psychological struggles. By turning Africa into a symbol instead of a lived reality, the novel pushes African experience aside and keeps Europe at the center. This kind of representation matches colonial ideas that present colonized lands as empty or in need of control.

Silence is one of the strongest tools of power in the novel. African voices are mostly absent. They are seen but not heard. This silence is not accidental. It is built into the structure of the story. By refusing to let Africans speak for themselves, the novel continues colonial power relations. Meaning is created only through European language and interpretation.

At the same time, this study recognizes Conrad's mixed position on imperialism. *Heart of Darkness* clearly exposes the cruelty and hypocrisy of empire, especially through the character of Kurtz. However, the novel mainly focuses on how imperialism affects Europeans, not on how it harms colonized people. This limits the strength of its criticism. The novel questions empire, but it does not fully challenge its power structure.

Because *Heart of Darkness* is still an important text in the English literary canon, postcolonial rereading is necessary. Such texts shape how history and culture are understood. Without critical reading, they can repeat harmful ideas. Postcolonial analysis helps readers ask important questions about language, power, and silence.

In conclusion, *Heart of Darkness* shows how literature can both criticize and support systems of domination at the same time. Its importance lies in this complexity. By studying how language and power work together in the novel, this paper shows why reading classic texts critically is essential. Postcolonial rereading does not reduce the value of literature. Instead, it helps us understand how literature reflects, supports, and questions power in society.

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