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Wilderness and Boudoir: Female Silence and the Construction of Imperial Ideology in *Heart of Darkness*

Yutong Yang

Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China

Abstract: *Heart of Darkness* is the masterpiece of Joseph Conrad. It recounts the experiences of the sailor Marlow during his voyage up the Congo River in Africa. While previous studies have paid more attention to the psychological and moral crises of male colonists, this study focuses on two neglected and silent female characters in the novel, Kurtz's African mistress and his European Fiancée, in order to reveal their role in the imperial narrative. This study will combine ecofeminism and postcolonialism. Through research and analysis, it is found that these two women are crucial symbols through which Conrad deconstructs the myth of imperial ideology. The African mistress is portrayed as the embodiment of "wild nature", while the European fiancée represents the myth of "pure civilization". Their silencing within the imperial narrative is not accidental, but discursively constructed by the empire to maintain the legitimacy of its rule. This arrangement deftly links the oppression of women to the exploitation of nature. This study concludes that Conrad profoundly exposes the inherent contradiction and violent nature of imperialism in terms of gender and ecology, and enriches the critical levels of the novel through the dualistic group of silent women.

Keywords: *Heart of Darkness*; Ecofeminist Criticism; Postcolonial Criticism

Heart of Darkness is often regarded as a novel that exposes the savage nature of European imperialism. Previous studies have mainly focused on the male narrator Marlow and the colonizer Kurtz, exploring their moral dilemmas, psychological alienation, and the hypocrisy of the European empire. However, the two female characters who are almost completely silent in the novel—Kurtz's African mistress and his European fiancée—have often been simplified to background figures or plot devices, and their profound symbolic significance has not received sufficient attention.

In fact, the silence of these two women is not the result of the author's negligence. On the contrary, their silence is the key to understanding the depth of the novel's critique. Positioned respectively in the colonial wilderness and the European boudoir, they form a sharp and deliberate contrast. This study argues that Conrad, through this binary pair of characters, skillfully constructs a symbolic system in which women and nature are jointly shaped as conquered and defined Others. The African mistress is portrayed as the embodiment of wild and mysterious nature, while the European fiancée symbolizes the civilized ideal of purity and protection. Their muteness is a prerequisite for the maintenance of

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colonial power.

To this end, this study will adopt a combined ecofeminist and postcolonial perspective. Ecofeminist theory helps us understand why women and nature are often bound together in colonial narratives and simultaneously reduced to objects of domination. Postcolonial theory, meanwhile, enables us to analyze how this process of othering and silencing serves the ideology and ruling order of empire. Through a renewed close reading of the text, this paper will argue that these two women are not minor characters, but rather central symbols employed by Conrad to deconstruct the myth of empire. Their double silence jointly constitutes an imperial allegory that profoundly exposes the inherent contradictions and fundamental violence of colonialism in terms of gender, ecology, and ethics. This interpretation not only provides a new space for understanding *Heart of Darkness*, but also encourages us to reflect on how power, both historically and in the present day, places certain groups and nature into positions of silence through similar discursive strategies.

1 Theoretical Framework: The Intersection of Ecofeminism and Postcolonialism

To thoroughly interpret the silence and symbolic functions of the female characters in *Heart of Darkness*, a single critical perspective is somewhat insufficient. Therefore, this chapter constructs a theoretical analytical framework that integrates ecofeminism and postcolonialism. This framework aims to clarify that the female images in Conrad's writing are not merely products of gender oppression, but also crucial symbols of the colonial empire's ideological and ecological exploitation. The combination of these two theories provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding the complex collusive relationship among nature, women, and colonial power in the novel.

1.1 Ecofeminism: Revealing the Connection and Oppression between Nature and Women

Ecofeminism is a cultural movement that combines the women's liberation movement with the ecological protection movement. The central proposition of ecofeminism lies in exposing how patriarchal society and anthropocentric ideology share an oppressive logical framework. Ecofeminists argue that both women and nature are regarded as the Other and placed in subordinate positions. Nature is often destroyed by humans just as women are frequently oppressed by men (Warren, 2000). Ecofeminism emphasizes the intrinsic connection between women and nature, organically linking the pursuit of gender equality with the protection of the ecological environment. Its ultimate goal is to improve gender relations and restore harmony between humanity and nature. This objective seeks to challenge the logical system and values of patriarchy and move toward a new worldview that emphasizes coexistence and symbiosis. As Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed in 1975, it is necessary to "replace a worldview emphasizing domination with one emphasizing alternative value systems" (Nangong et al., 2011).

Philosopher Val Plumwood points out that the Western rational tradition is founded upon a deeply rooted dualism, such as civilization/barbarism, reason/emotion, human/nature, and man/woman. These binary oppositions are not equal relationships; rather, the former are always endowed with superiority and thereby legitimize domination over the latter (Plumwood, 1993).

When this theoretical perspective is introduced into literary analysis, we can observe a common narrative strategy in colonial literature: the feminization of colonial landscapes. The undeveloped wilderness is often described as

mysterious, fertile, and dangerous, resembling a female body waiting to be conquered or possessed. At the same time, women are frequently naturalized; their bodies, temperaments, and social roles are often compared to natural phenomena such as the moon, the sea, or Mother Earth. This double metaphor serves the same purpose: to provide ideological justification for both the exploitation of natural resources and the disciplining of women. In *Heart of Darkness*, we will see that Kurtz's African mistress is the perfect embodiment of this double metaphor. Her image merges with the Congolese jungle, and the magnificence of her wildness both stimulates the desires of the colonizers and confirms their imagination of barbarism awaiting control, thereby legitimizing their physical and symbolic possession of her.

1.2 Postcolonialism: Analyzing "Othering" and the Politics of Knowledge

Postcolonial theory, represented by figures such as Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, focuses on analyzing how imperialism exercises and maintains its rule through discourse, knowledge, and systems of representation. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that the Orient is not a geographical entity but rather an image of the Other constructed by Europe in order to establish its own superiority. It is depicted as exotic, backward, and emotional, standing in opposition to the rational, progressive, and civilized West. Such representation is itself an act of power (Said, 1977).

In her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak further deepens this analysis, especially from the perspective of gender. She points out that within the dual structures of colonialism and patriarchy, subaltern women are deprived of subjectivity and the ability to speak. They are not narrators of their own experiences, but objects being described and defined by others (Spivak, 2023). Their silence is the result of structural oppression: colonial discourse and indigenous patriarchy jointly block the channels through which they might speak. This insight directly illuminates the situations of the two women in *Heart of Darkness*. The speechlessness of the African mistress and the European fiancée's willful ignorance of the truth are not personal traits, but inevitable products of the systematic operation of imperial discourse. One is excluded from the discursive system altogether, while the Other is imprisoned within the carefully fabricated false discourse of empire.

1.3 The Intersection of Theories: An Integrated Analytical Approach

Although ecofeminism and postcolonialism emphasize different aspects, they intersect and complement one another profoundly when analyzing colonial contexts. Both are committed to deconstructing the hegemonic logic of Western centrism, both examine how power consolidates itself through the definition of the Other, and both pay attention to marginalized groups. Their combination enables us to simultaneously examine the three intertwined forms of oppression in *Heart of Darkness*: the ecological exploitation of colonial nature, the racial oppression of colonized peoples, and the gender oppression of women.

This integrated framework leads us to raise the following key questions: How does the image of Kurtz's African mistress concretely embody the dual metaphor of the "naturalized woman" and "feminized nature"? How is the "civilized" myth surrounding Kurtz and the empire, firmly believed by the European fiancée, constructed and maintained? What functional role does her ignorance play within imperial ideology? Ultimately, how are the respective silences of these two seemingly opposing women, positioned at opposite poles, interconnected in ways that collectively sustain the ultimately fragile fantasy of empire?

2 The Symbol of Wildness: The Woman in the Wilderness as the "Naturalized" Other

The appearance of Kurtz's African mistress is brief yet profoundly striking. She is not only an Other in terms of gender, but also an Other in terms of race and nature. Her silencing within the dominant narrative is the inevitable product of the colonial gaze and the desire for conquest. Conrad's portrayal of the African mistress almost erases her individuality and completely merges her into the imagery of the Congolese wilderness. As Marlow's steamboat is about to leave Kurtz's trading station, she appears on the shore:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul (Conrad, 1925, p. 179).

This woman is a symbolic extension of the African landscape itself. Conrad directly equates her with the African wilderness, so that her existence and meaning no longer derive from herself, but from the mysterious, dangerous, and uncultivated land in which she lives. Her soul, like the soul of that land, is mysterious, passionate, and full of wildness. She emerges from the wilderness and returns to it. She is no longer an independent individual, but the embodied spirit and flesh of the wilderness itself. The paired contradictions—savage yet superb, wild yet magnificent—allow readers to perceive the colonizers' ambivalent psychology: on the one hand, they regard her as a primitive savage, while on the Other, they are irresistibly captivated by her shocking and exotic beauty. Such wildness and grandeur directly correspond to the European colonizers' imagined Africa: fertile yet deadly. Carolyn Merchant argues that Enlightenment thought constructed nature as passive, mysterious, and feminized in order to legitimize the control exercised by science and empire (Merchant, 2006).

However, European colonizers not only naturalize her but also completely silence her. Throughout the narrative, she has no name and remains voiceless, appearing only through the gaze of white male observers: first through Marlow's distant description, and second through the Russian trader's fearful and confused retelling. The Russian recalls:

If she had offered to come aboard, I really think I would have tried to shoot her… I had been risking my life every day for the last fortnight to keep her out of the house… She got in one day and kicked up a row about those miserable rags I picked up in the store-room to mend my clothes with. I wasn't decent. At least it must have been that, for she talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour, pointing at me now and then… I don't understand the dialect of this tribe (Conrad, 1925, p. 181).

The Russian's account makes it clear that the African woman is not devoid of action or emotion; rather, her language is marked as incomprehensible, and thus her anger and demands are dissolved within colonial discourse into incomprehensible hysteria. Furthermore, her bodily movement is strictly confined to the domain of nature. The moment she attempts to enter the civilized space of Europeans, she immediately provokes threats of violence. This is precisely the literary embodiment of the predicament of the subaltern analyzed by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak argues that under the dual structures of imperial and patriarchal power, subaltern women occupy the most marginalized position; their subjectivity is systematically erased, making it impossible for them to obtain a genuine position of speech within colonial discourse (Spivak, 2023). Even when, like this African woman, they are given an opportunity to speak, they still cannot truly be understood. The African woman's speechlessness is the inevitable

consequence of the imperial discourse system's refusal to recognize the legitimacy of her language and subjectivity.

The naturalization and silencing of the African woman further reveal the exploitation and possession of both nature and women by European colonial men. Her image powerfully embodies the dual logic of nature-woman domination criticized by ecofeminism. Her body is highly sexualized and commodified. Through Marlow's eyes, the text lavishly emphasizes her externalized and objectified beauty: she is draped in striped and fringed cloths, adorned with barbarous ornaments that glitter and jingle, including brass leggings, a brass headpiece, glass beads, and countless charms. Marlow even estimates that "She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her" (Conrad, 1925, p. 179). This estimate is crucial, for it ruthlessly equates her bodily adornments with the central object of colonial economic plunder—ivory. Her beauty, like Africa's abundance, is reduced to a form of natural resource available for appraisal and conquest. Val Plumwood points out that the Western rational tradition constructs nature and women as object domains awaiting exploration, control, and enjoyment by the male subject (Plumwood, 2002). Kurtz's possession of her symbolically mirrors his greedy plunder of ivory; both belong to the same logic of conquest.

At the same time, her image also evokes fear. Marlow feels a "sudden and futile rage", as though she might bring "disaster", while the Russian remains deeply wary of her. This fear arises from the unknowable and uncontrollable power of the wilderness she represents, as well as from the colonizers' anxiety over possible resistance from the conquered (Conrad, 1925, p. 181). Anne McClintock points out that colonial discourse often depicts colonial land and female bodies as sources of chaos requiring discipline under white masculine order (McClintock, 1995). The mistress's "sorrowful and passionate," "restrained yet explosive" expression, along with her final gesture of "stretching bare arms above her head", represents an eruptive moment of this untamed and potentially resistant Otherness.

Therefore, through the naturalization, silencing, and commodification of the African woman, Conrad shapes her into a complex symbol carrying multiple colonial fantasies. She is an object upon which desire and fear are projected, a vivid embodiment of colonial economic logic, and a silent spokesperson for the plundered land itself. Her existence powerfully reveals how imperialism intertwines the oppression of women, racial discrimination, and the exploitation of nature within the same ideological and practical system. This image of the naturalized Other also provides a structural contrast to her opposite counterpart—the civilized European fiancée—whose appearance, together with hers, forms the gendered pillar upon which imperial discourse depends for survival.

3 The Illusion of Civilization: The Fiancée in the Boudoir as a Moralized Myth

In sharp contrast to the African woman as the image of the naturalized Other, Kurtz's fiancée stands in Europe. She appears at the end of the novel, where the setting shifts from the primitive jungle of the Congo to a tall and dim boudoir in Brussels. If the African woman is the object upon which colonial desire and fear are projected, then the Intended symbolizes the moral purity and civilizing mission that the imperial center constructs for itself. This chapter argues that through this woman, Conrad reveals how imperialism conceals the barbarity of its colonial practices by shaping and maintaining a specific form of femininity—an angelic image characterized by fidelity, ignorance, and sacrificial devotion—thereby completing the ideological closure of empire.

The Intended's appearance is enveloped in an atmosphere saturated with death and mourning, which itself functions

as an ideological stage setting.

She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning. It was more than a year since his death… she seemed as though she would remember and mourn forever (Conrad, 1925, p. 218).

Her "black clothing" and her posture of "eternal mourning" are not merely expressions of personal grief, but rather a ritualized performance conforming to social expectations. This performance completely absorbs her individuality into the social role of the bereaved woman, whose function is to sanctify and sentimentalize Kurtz's death, thereby stripping away the concrete brutality of his actions in the colony. By continuously performing the role of the faithful mourner, the Intended in fact reinforces a form of idealized femininity that serves imperial narratives: she must remain pure in opposition to the wildness of the African woman; she must remain loyal in order to legitimize the worthiness of imperial elites; and her vision must remain confined to the sphere of private emotion so that she may maintain a structural ignorance toward colonial violence in the public sphere.

The Intended's defining characteristic is not evil, but rather a complete ignorance founded upon belief. Her conversation with Marlow becomes a fierce confrontation between truth and myth. The image of Kurtz she constructs is that of a great man, who "You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man", someone capable of awakening "the best emotions" in others and radiating "the light of virtue". She firmly believes that "his words will endure forever" and that "his example" is immortal. This faith is so unwavering that it forms a fortress against truth itself. As Marlow struggles inwardly, he realizes: "I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether…" (Conrad, 1925, p. 220) He finds himself unable to destroy her great and saving illusion.

This ignorance is a crucial component in the operation of imperial ideology. In *Culture and Imperialism,* Edward Said argues that imperial narratives depend upon separating the experiences of the center from those of the margins, enabling people in metropolitan centers to immerse themselves in romanticized fantasies of the civilizing mission while remaining detached from the exploitation and violence occurring in colonial peripheries (Said, 2014). The Intended is the perfect audience and spokesperson for this central narrative. Her understanding of Kurtz is entirely based on "his words", while consciously avoiding "his actions". She laments that "of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart, nothing remains", which precisely reveals that what she cherishes is not Kurtz as a complete and darkly flawed individual, but rather the imperial ideal represented by his rhetoric.

The most ironic and critical moment in the novel is Marlow's final lie to the Intended. Under her heartbroken plea—" I want—I want—something—something—to—to live with"—Marlow ultimately utters the lie: "The last word he pronounced was—your name." (Conrad, 1925, p. 222) This lie is not merely an act of kindness or consolation; it is a profound act of ideological complicity. Marlow's motives are complex: there is compassion, but also fear. What he fears is that if he were to reveal the truth—" The horror! The horror!"—he would utterly destroy the illusion that sustains not only this woman, but the entire dignity of imperial civilization. As he reflects: "It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head." This house and heavens metaphorically represent the entire order of European civilization founded upon false morality.

Therefore, Marlow's choice is made in order to preserve the stability of the illusion. He replaces a terrifying truth that exposes moral nihilism with a lie conforming to romantic narrative expectations. Through this act, the Intended becomes completely instrumentalized: she is transformed into a figure who must be nourished by falsehood so that her faith may continue to provide a humanized ornament for the myth of empire. Her willful ignorance of the truth thus

becomes necessary, while her voice, which merely repeats imperial myths, becomes an echo of imperial discourse itself.

In conclusion, Kurtz's fiancée is by no means a secondary sentimental character; she is a carefully forged product of imperial ideology and one pole within the binary opposition of civilization/barbarism. Through her performance of eternal mourning and loyalty, she transforms the colonizer's death into a sublime sacrifice. Through her firm yet ignorant faith in virtue, she filters and beautifies the brutal truths emerging from the colonies. Ultimately, her very existence compels—and even seduces—witnesses of truth such as Marlow into participating in the conspiracy of concealment. Ecofeminism criticizes the tendency to reduce women to symbols of either "nature" or "spirit", while postcolonialism exposes how the empire manipulates gender roles in order to control knowledge. The Intended stands precisely at the intersection of these two logics: she is elevated into a symbol of moral spirit (an angel), yet the price of this elevation is her complete ignorance of and alienation from the realm of nature—that is, the material practices of colonialism. Like the African woman, she too is silent, but hers is a gilded silence, one carefully placed within the illusion fabricated by imperialism. One is dark and the Other bright; one is wild, and the Other is civilized. Together, they form the gendered symbolic pillars through which imperialism sustains its own self-justifying discourse. The ending of the novel suggests that what ultimately maintains this entire system is not truth, but lies.

4 Juxtaposition and Complicity: Imperial Narrative within a Binary Structure

The African mistress and the European fiancée occupy opposite ends of the same spectrum of imperial imagination; their existences are mutually defining and mutually dependent. The African mistress is naturalized as part of the colonial landscape. Her body becomes an object of both desire and fear, while her speechlessness symbolizes the colony's presumed lack of rational language and subjectivity comprehensible to civilization. She is the object of imperial material exploitation and projected desire, the embodiment of darkness. In contrast, the European fiancée is "moralized" into the pure ideal of the imperial center. Her spirit is shaped into the embodiment of loyalty and faith, while her ignorance represents the deliberate epistemological isolation maintained by the empire in order to preserve its moral legitimacy. She becomes the shrine of the empire's spiritual mission and romantic imagination, the guardian of so-called light.

Although their manifestations differ—one being the silencing imposed upon the colonized who are deprived of the right to speak, and the Other being the ignorance produced through the imperial discourse's active concealment of truth—their roles within the imperial narrative are functionally analogous: they ensure the coherence and smooth operation of imperial narrative. The silence of the African mistress prevents the brutal realities of colonialism and the voices of resistance from entering the dominant discursive sphere of empire, thereby allowing acts of plunder to be narrated as development or adventure. The silence of the European fiancée protects the moral self-image of the imperial center from contamination by fact, enabling colonial violence to be beautified as sacrifice and idealism.

More importantly, Marlow's final lie to the Intended marks the ultimate completion of imperial ideology. When the witness to truth chooses to replace horrifying reality with a romantic lie, he actively participates in preserving the Intended as a moral symbol, and thus in preserving the core values of the empire itself. This act demonstrates that the maintenance of empire depends not only upon the violent silencing of the Other, but also upon selective indoctrination and complicit deception within the imperial Self. At this moment, the two forms of silence converge, jointly

extinguishing the possibility of exposing the dark core of empire.

Therefore, *Heart of Darkness* is not merely a geographical and moral exploration of colonialism, but also a silent map of how imperial ideology constructs and deconstructs itself through gendered symbols. The novel reveals that imperialism not only plunders land and resources but also systematically appropriates and distorts representations of nature, women, and civilization in order to serve its structures of power. Critically interpreting this symbolic system is thus essential for unveiling the empire's own "heart of darkness". As the novel ultimately suggests, the deepest darkness may not lie in the distant Congolese jungle, but within the very civilization that creates and depends upon these illusions of light.

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