

THE VOICELESS BODIES: NARRATION OF FEMALE FIGURES IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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Abstract

Although the infamous Heart of Darkness (1899) has gone on to become one of the most widely analyzed works of English literature, it is possible that Conrad still has some failings on portraying the female figures in the novella. The seven of them might come from or have different backgrounds, appearances, and narrative, but there is one thing they have in common: the absence of voice.

Keywords: *voicelessness; women; Joseph Conrad; Heart of Darkness*

A. Introduction

Heart of Darkness tells a story within a story. The entirety of the work has a total of three chapters. The story centers around Charlie Marlow, an introspective sailor who tells his sea voyage to Congo to the passenger of The Nellie boat--floating on the River Thames. When dealing with the civilizing work in Africa, Heart of Darkness raises the issue of criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness (Murfin, 1996). This idea later led to readers' diverse interpretations, reactions, and remarks about the book itself. Both applauding Conrad's ability to properly describe things, actions, and occurrences in Africa at that time precisely (Hochschild, 1999), or extremely criticizing on how bloody racist Conrad is (Achebe, 2016).

Although Heart of Darkness is best known for depicting the true nature and misery of colonisation through a man's lens, particularly in the Third World nation, Conrad has also been criticized for how his work presents its female characters. The portrayal of women's presence is frequently questioned or debated, since it appears that Marlow's story seeks to "colonize" and "pacify" both the savage darkness and women (Smith, 1996). In this paper, I'd like to argue how Marlow's narrative limits the seven female characters' ability to depict themselves as autonomous bodies who are capable of speaking on behalf of their own self.

B. Women as Weak Figures

When Marlow begins his story with the ambitions to go to Africa, he also mentions that he has an enthusiastic, excellent and triumphant aunt (p. 60). The praise is given by Marlow because his aunt has succeeded in getting Marlow to get his dream job. However, despite the generous heart of Marlow's aunt, he discriminates against her by perceiving her as a *weak figure*. In his effort to get the job, Marlow first went out to his *dear male fellow* who later responded with nothing (p. 60). Marlow, exasperated, ultimately decided to contact his aunt by saying that *he tried the women* (p. 60). Here, I

believe Marlow initially thought his aunt was a “nobody”. This is because Marlow prefers to seek help from his male friends rather than his own aunt, who turned out to be a powerful figure in the office. Marlow appears to regard his aunt as a helpless figure and final resort.

Another example of how Marlow sees *women as weak figures* is when he lied to Mr. Kurtz’s Intended about his last words. In Marlow’s visit to Mr. Kurtz’s fiancée, he told the story of how great Mr. Kurtz is to comfort the brokenhearted lady. She later insisted on knowing Mr. Kurtz’s last words before he died. Marlow was not sure whether he should be honest about this or not, but eventually he did and lied: that his last words were her name (p. 182). In his beliefs, Marlow believes that it would have been too dark (p. 182). It was too dark for her to understand the reality of how savage and cruel life would be in a colonised country. This, too, leads me to believe that it is one of Marlow’s attempts to portray *women as weak figures* by concealing the truth and assuming that women are too pure or weak to face the *actual* world or situation that is happening.

C. Women as Terrors

Later, he shows his notion about how women are terror--a person or thing that makes someone very frightened (“Terror”, n. d.), --when he described the woman who knits. When he arrives at the offices of The Company, he encounters two women, one fat and the other slim, who sit knitting with black wool. The younger one seems busy walking back and forth, while the older one just sitting in her chair and looking at everybody in the room (p. 64). Marlow then finds her glance disturbs him as he feels this eerie feeling (p. 64), and the woman seems uncanny and fateful (p. 64). Marlow describes the older woman as the person knew all about everybody in the room and about him too (p. 64).

I found this quite problematic because it could have just been Marlow’s supposition and feeling. When a person is uncomfortable, they tend to overthink, and Marlow is no exception. Perhaps, the old lady is just casually looking at everybody in the same way, and Marlow is the only one who is intimidated by her glance, because other people seemed cheery (p. 64). Thus, Marlow over-determines the unusual vibe around the lady by saying “Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way” (p. 64). This speculation then leads to another problem: Marlow’s prejudice towards the old lady makes some of the readers assume the lady (and her friend) is related to the three Fates of Greek who spin the threads of human destiny (Smith, 1996). Marlow’s assumption creates this domino effect that affects the way the readers perceive and judge a character. He also emphasizes the idea of how women are terror when he said “It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset.” (p. 67). Here, Marlow blatantly states that women would destroy or knock the whole thing over if they are included in the real world. He separates and isolates women because he thinks that women will ruin everything if they are exposed to the reality.

D. Women as Objects

The depiction of how women portrayed as *objects* is when Mr. Kurtz’s intended, the African laundress, and Mr. Kurtz’s mother are mentioned in *Heart of Darkness*. Mr. Kurtz always refers to the European lady whom he loves as *my* Intended. He even mentioned her when he lists all of his belongings, “My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my---” (p. 131). Mr. Kurtz’s constant use of the possessive term “my” while referring to and describing his Intended led me to conclude that he views women, in this case his Intended, as something he *owns*.

Another example is when Marlow asked The Company’s Chief Accountant in the Inner Station about how he maintained *such linen* that he wears (p. 77). The Accountant blushed and said that he has been *teaching* one of the native women in the station to wash his clothes, yet she has a distaste of work (p. 77). The native woman he refers to is a slave whom he teaches to do laundry. By definition, a

slave is the property of another person and has to work for that person (“Slave”, n.d). This also emphasizes the notion of how women are portrayed as a commodity to be owned and *exploited*.

Lastly, the existence of Mr. Kurtz’s mother in the novella is marked by “His mother was half-English, his father was half-French.” (p. 133), to emphasize the detailed information about how Mr. Kurtz could speak English to Marlow. He probably has been educated by his mother about English language ever since he was a kid. Here, Mr. Kurtz’s mother plays a role of being a *complement* to *decorate* Mr. Kurtz’s characterization. She appears just to highlight one of Mr. Kurtz’s abilities: to speak and be able to communicate in English. The three female figures who have been portrayed as *objects* are all *owned* or act as a *compliment* to certain characters. They exist to *build* or even *add power* to the character that they are related to. They do not have the agency or ability to act on their own.

E. The Voiceless Bodies

Voiceless is the situation where someone does not have the ability to stand by their own. The voiceless bodies do not have this power or opportunity to express themselves through their own body--their identity. That they are being silenced for certain reasons. Clark refers to voiceless bodies as the bodies who cannot speak for themselves--including the ones who are represented by the others (Clark, 2013). The notion of subjugation and prejudice are heavily emphasized in *Heart of Darkness*, which eventually resulted in the inability of speaking on behalf of one’s self. The examples given above show how the narrator and other male characters, including Marlow’s own inner thoughts, discriminate against the female figures. Although there are some female figures, like Marlow’s aunt and Mr. Kurtz’s Intended, who can talk, they do not speak for themselves, but as a part of other characters. Despite the fact that they had the ability to speak with, respond to, and even converse with other characters, they are nonetheless referred to as Marlow’s aunt or Mr. Kurtz’s intended. They still have the possessive pronoun linked to them. This proves that they still do not have the ability to speak for themselves.

On the other hand, this inability to speak is not only owned by the powerless female characters who have been mentioned. In the story, there is this magnificent native female figure who carried her head high and glittered and trembled at every step (p. 153). The young fellows and the pilgrims who came with Marlow even felt threatened by the presence of this native woman (p. 153). However, despite the fact she is described as a charming powerful figure, she does not have any line or the capacity to speak. She remained silent, muted, with no identity.

F. Conclusion

From the description above, it is clear that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* provides a great deal of evidence how it restricts its female characters’ ability to speak and act on their own behalf. Marlow, the narrator, would never regard a woman to be an independent being, because he always refers to them as the relatives of their signifier. The same goes with the female characters who even have the chance to speak. Marlow, once again, did not regard their existence as an autonomous being and silenced them all.

G. References

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