

**THE FIVE NAIVE WOMEN: A POSTCOLONIAL-FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF
JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS***

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Abstract:

In today's postcolonial world one cannot read literary works without looking at the space allowed to the other sexual category that is women. Feminism is closely associated with postcolonial theory and both have developed simultaneously. The objective of both the discourses is to wrestle for the rights of the disregarded communities and help them achieve apposite place vis-à-vis the governing groups. It objects to women being entrusted to subordinate spots. Feminism promotes women's efforts to combat essentialism and sexual tropes. A postcolonial-feminist reader or critic must not overlook the undeniable influence of the male-centric discourse of progress and imperialistic viewpoints in Conrad's narratives. Consequently, even a brief examination of his female characters reveals that Conrad neither bestows significant prominence upon any woman nor seems to address women readers. Furthermore, the author narrates his stories from the vantage point of a member within the dominant male group. The objective of the present paper is to dissect the manifestations of biased and unequal gender relationships prevalent during the colonial era, as vividly depicted through Conrad's favoured narrator's interactions with the five women in *Heart of Darkness*. This paper endeavours to scrutinize whether Conrad's portrayal of women resonates with them being subject to ingrained sexism and confined in the boundaries of patriarchal norms, or if they exhibit a simultaneous engagement in the male-dominated milieu. Through this analysis, the aim is to uncover the intricate nuances of Conrad's treatment of gender dynamics in the colonial context and ascertain the extent to which his depiction reflects or challenges prevailing socio-political norms. It is done through investigating the ostracism of knowledge, experiences and ambitions of women subjects. The paper attempts to explore whether Conrad has been able to redefine the roles, status and the space given to the second sex. It questions whether or not Conrad is a part of the hegemonic patriarchal set-up that constructs the psychology of women and keeps them subordinated and subjugated in all the fields.

Keywords: Social construct, Subordinated, Second sex, Male-domination, Postcolonialism, Feminism, Marginalised, Essentialism, Sexual tropes, Patriarchal norms.

Background and Aim:

No reading of postcolonial theory can be considered comprehensive without taking into account the issue of gender. With the passage of time the construction of gender on the social and political bases has gained more acceptance than the biological determinism of the two sexes. Gender has always been “imbricated in the matrix of power, exploitation and resistance. . .” (Lewis & Mills 20). As is well established by now, sex may be biological but gender is social and political. According to Lewis and Mills, the term gender was “developed initially as a term to describe the social constructedness of ‘women’ and ‘men’”. In opposition to the apparently simple biological differences of ‘sex’, gender seemed to be a more nuanced and historicized concept” (4). The masculinity of men and the femininity of women have been determined on the basis of designed appropriate conduct. The abnormal form of the behaviour is stigmatized. And therefore, “the normative alignment of male and woman with heterosexual masculinity or femininity in the dominant gender culture must therefore be seen as a political rather than a biological fact” (Ryan 116).

Feminism is closely related to postcolonial theory. Ashcroft says, “feminist perspectives are of increasing importance in postcolonial criticism and indeed the strategies of recent feminist and recent postcolonial theory overlap and inform each other” (30). Moreover writers like, “Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Paul Marshall, and Margret Atawood have all drawn analogy between the relationships of men and women and those of imperial power and the colony, while critics like Gayatri Spivak have articulated the relationship between feminism, post-structuralism, and discourse of post-colonality” (Ashcroft 30). Feminism and postcolonialism have developed at the same pace. The purpose of both the discourses is to struggle for the rights of the marginalized and help them achieve their appropriate position vis-à-vis the dominant groups. Feminism has been a collective work developed in different directions by women. It objects to challenge the notions of women being consigned to secondary sites. Feminism promotes women’s efforts to combat essentialism and sexual tropes.

In the same vein Ashcroft also believes “in many different societies, women, like the colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonized’ by various forms of patriarchal domination” (249). Another reason offered is that the early feminist theory, “like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, was concerned with inverting the structures of domination” (Ashcroft 249). It is commonly observed that the oppression of those considered religiously, culturally, and racially inferior is intricately linked with the control exerted over women. Likewise, in the works of Conrad, an exploration of the author’s treatment of female characters becomes essential, as he appears to align with the perspectives of Victorian patriarchal frameworks. The male dominated culture treats the women and the savages in the same manner, “by imposing a sentimental and reductive definition upon the object that removes the necessity of actually looking at it” (Hyland 4).

A postcolonial-feminist reader or critic must not overlook the undeniable influence of the male-centric discourse of progress and imperialistic viewpoints in Conrad's narratives. Consequently, even a brief examination of his female characters reveals that Conrad neither bestows significant prominence upon any woman nor seems to address women readers. Furthermore, the author narrates his stories from the vantage point of a member within the dominant male group. His portrayal of women is such that it leaves no room for readers to engage with her, appreciate her value, or establish identification with her. Conrad becomes a participant in a scenario that compels women to conform precisely to the roles imposed upon them by patriarchal society. His male characters often perceive women, alternately, as servants or witches.

In Conrad's novels, women have not been endowed with an individual standing. Gurko also says, "the slight air of unreality that surrounds Conrad's women is the product of the Polish chivalrous tradition in which he grew up and which his later immersion in the cautious gentility of late Victorian England did not dispel" (223). He feels that Conrad's own life experiences have subjected him to the influences of colonial-patriarchal dominance from an early age. Accordingly, women, irrespective of their racial background—be it white, half-caste, or non-white—have been systematically excluded from the position of subjects, rarely assuming significant roles within his literary works. Furthermore, the majority of these female characters are portrayed in a negative light, often relegated to dismissive depictions. Postcolonial-feminist readers observe that in Conrad also as in any patriarchal writer,

. . . it is man who fights with the sword, explores the world, conquers territory - who acts, who undertakes. Through him are accomplished the plans of God upon earth. Woman appears to be only an auxiliary. She is the one who stays in place, who waits, and who keeps things up . . ." (Beauvoir 241).

An exploration of the relationships between women and their narrators, their interactions with their husbands and lovers, as well as their associations with each other, reveal Conrad's unequivocal alignment with the prevailing patriarchal structure. This patriarchal framework significantly curtails, shapes, and confines the women's social, economic, political, and intellectual agency. The women in this context lack an independent literary, poetic, or religious realm; instead, their aspirations and dreams are encompassed in the dreams of men themselves. In Conrad's literary oeuvre, it is evident that the heroic personas are primarily males, relegating women to secondary roles. Beauvoir believes that in Conrad "man is defined as a human being and woman as a woman - whenever she behaves as a human being, she is said to imitate the male" (53). For the sexual fulfilment the man annexes and the woman surrender. Women are thus, the inessential.

The objective of the present paper is to dissect the manifestations of biased and unequal gender relationships prevalent during the colonial era, as vividly depicted through Conrad's favoured narrator's interactions with the five women in *Heart of Darkness*. This

paper endeavours to scrutinize whether Conrad's portrayal of women resonates with them being subject to ingrained sexism and confined in the patriarchal norms, or if they exhibit a simultaneous engagement of the male-dominated milieu. Through this analysis, the aim is to uncover the intricate nuances of Conrad's treatment of gender dynamics within the colonial context and ascertain the extent to which his depiction reflects or challenges prevailing socio-political norms. It is done through investigating the ostracism of knowledge, experiences and ambitions of women subjects. It attempts to explore whether Conrad has been able to redefine the roles, status and the space given to the second sex. It questions whether or not Conrad is a part of the hegemonic patriarchal set-up that constructs the psychology of women and keeps them subordinated and subjugated in all the fields.

Analysis:

Read and analysed from a postcolonial-feminist standpoint, it may be observed that there are five women characters and the briefest look at them underscores that Conrad has not given them a considerable space in his work *Heart of Darkness*. According to Hay,

Achebe and others have noted, *Heart of Darkness* is often found to be as objectionable to feminists as it is to anti-racists, and certainly women *are* categorized in the story in ways that would be offensive if we fail to see that again Marlow, not Conrad, is the offender (175).

Conrad's Aunt:

Conrad's narrator observes a distinct detachment of all the women from the socio-political reality and the realm of men. It would not be an unfounded assumption to posit that Marlow's perspective closely aligns with that of the author's. Marlow expresses a desire for his aunt to secure a job on his behalf, a situation that brings his feelings of humiliation and shame to the forefront when his own efforts to secure the desired employment prove fruitless. He confesses, "Then – would you believe it? – I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work – to get a job. Heavens!" (Conrad 22). It seems that the assistance from a woman reduces Marlow's self-esteem. Moreover, Marlow's aunt expresses her happiness and pride in the fact that Marlow is going to be employed in the Company that purposes to dissuade "those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (Conrad 27). However, Marlow dismisses her perspectives with a lack of seriousness. The imperial structure fabricates narratives around its supposedly benevolent intention to assist non-white populations, yet Marlow derisively undermines one of these myths when it is voiced by his aunt. Marlow feels surprised at the community of women who are "out of touch with truth . . . They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset" (Conrad 27).

In this instance, we observe one of Conrad's consistently dependable characters revealing his prejudices against women. Marlow might not be Conrad himself, but he frequently serves as his moral compass. As a result, Marlow's interaction with his aunt underscores his conviction in the inferiority of women and, by extension, possibly reflects Conrad's stance as well, given Achebe's assertion that Marlow enjoys the author's full

confidence. He says, “Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their careers” (Achebe 256). The above incident shows that Marlow admires what Beauvoir calls, “the traditional order of society with its conservative politics and uncritical acceptance of mid-nineteenth-century beliefs . . .” (Beauvoir viii). Such women in Conrad are gulped by silence and they become inconspicuous and indiscernible.

The two black-garbed women outside the Company’s office:

Marlow also feels uncomfortable in the presence of the two black-garbed women sitting outside the Company’s office. The “indifferent placidity” of the look of the old and fat woman troubles him (Conrad 24). He finds her “uncanny and fateful” (Conrad 25). Throughout Marlow’s presence in the office, the two women maintain absolute silence. Functioning like well-lubricated components of a machine, they diligently carry out their task of guiding the young men visiting the Company’s office. Their muteness renders them akin to inanimate objects, devoid of voice and expression.

Examined through the lens of postcolonial-feminism, a discerning reader might detect a degree of empathy on Conrad’s part when addressing the role of these two women. He has allocated them a certain measure of textual presence. When Marlow is leaving the office, he looks at the two women once again and feels, as if the two are “guarding the door of Darkness” (Conrad 25). These two individuals could be interpreted as symbolic entities, potentially embodying the Fates from Greek mythology, knitting the fateful destinies of Africans or those embarking on journeys to Africa. However, they remain at the mercy of the narrator’s interpretation and manipulation. These two women, rendered voiceless and unexpressive, are presented as ominous bearers of mortality, devoid of humanization. The depiction of these characters underscores the novel’s alignment with Western patriarchal biases concerning gender.

Kurtz’s Queen:

In Congo the Queen stands as a singular woman whom the author thoughtfully devotes an entire page to describe. Undoubtedly, Conrad delves into the portrayal of Kurtz’s Queen with a certain level of depth. However, when viewed through a postcolonial-feminist lens, it becomes apparent that Conrad intends to juxtapose her with Kurtz’s Intended—a white woman. Kurtz’s Queen emanates vigour, opulence, enigma, and mystique. She is described as “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent” (Conrad 89) and the Intended according to Sarvan is “pale and rather anaemic” (Sarvan 284). Achebe also notices the difference between the two women of Kurtz and says:

towards the end of the story Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz . . . This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad’s special brand of approval and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman . . .” (255).

One more dissimilarity between the two women is that the author has bestowed the sophisticated and cultured woman with the gift of human expression and withholds it from the so-called savage, wild and uncivilised one.

Among the natives, the Queen stands out as the sole individual unafraid when Marlow blows the whistle of his steamship. While portrayed as invulnerable to the tools and infrastructure of the white man, similar to other female characters in Conrad's works, she too finds herself in the position of supplication, beseeching and endeavouring to stop the departure of her lover. As with Conrad's recurrent portrayal of women, the Queen is rendered silent and motionless. She stands at the bank with her arms outstretched, "like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose" (89). She, perhaps, is the wilderness that had embraced and loved Kurtz and even got into his veins. The Queen becomes the embodiment of the spirit of the jungle. She stands for Beauvoir's "Nymphs, dryads, sirens, undines, fairies [that] haunt the fields and the woods, the lakes, oceans, moorland" (Beauvoir 165). The softened strength, physical savagery, and sexual charisma of the woman confirm and reinforce Conrad's attitude towards women.

For Marlow, the Queen exercises an unintelligible and unfathomable authority, influence and sovereignty, which she seems to have acquired from her environment. He describes her as, "the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life [which] seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (Conrad 89). Marlow remembers Kurtz's non-white Queen as a "tragic and familiar shade . . . stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness" (Conrad 108). The Medusa-like depiction of the Queen seems to be projected to show her as a commanding creation, but of the seductive darkness of the jungle. The portrayal of the Queen characterizes her as embodying a sense of foreboding, along with an aura of enigma and bewilderment. She transcends the confines of Victorian conventions, leading Marlow to associate her with elements diverging from the norm, such as obscurity, clamour, peculiarity, unconventionality, darkness, vociferousness, eeriness and non-conformity. But C. P. Sarvan wants the readers to notice that "The African woman faces the truth and endures the pain of her dereliction, whilst the illusions of the two European women are also fond illusions of European society" (284).

Kurtz's Queen offers an alternative perspective to the anticipated righteousness and constrained innocence often attributed to white Victorian women, akin to Kurtz's Intended. Much like Conrad's juxtaposition of the Congo and the Thames, the segregation he establishes between Kurtz's white and non-white women reflects a pronounced bias. Unlike the Queen, Kurtz's Intended epitomizes the quintessence of a Victorian woman, characterized by her regal demeanour, dignity, grace, refinement, and cultivated conduct.

Kurtz's Intended:

Before the meeting with the Intended, Marlow sees the Intended's photograph and assesses that she is a woman who seems to be ready "to listen without reservation, without

suspicion, without a thought for herself” to anything (Conrad 103). The text says that she has “a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (Conrad 105). Marlow contemplates divulging to her the grim truth behind Kurtz’s life, and there exists a possibility that she might have borne the weight of Kurtz’s reality. However, when they meet, Marlow withdraws, as he cannot muster the courage to communicate that Kurtz had deteriorated into a mere husk of his former self, reduced to a lifeless entity or that he had simply become a waste or that her lover had been reduced to an inanimate object. Marlow is unable to convey to the Intended that the wilderness had lain claim over Kurtz’s hollow core self and had overtaken his once vibrant inner essence. He could not say that Africa “loved him, caressed him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation” and also that “the whisper [of the jungle] had proved irresistibly fascinating” for her fiancé (Conrad 72, 85). The isolation and seclusion of the rough country had gone so deep into the veins of Kurtz that he had been made to follow the animalistic/darker side of his soul. Marlow’s attitude towards the Intended, a woman who has not been given any name like many other women of Conrad, shows that he treats her as a “cocooned dreamer whom a touch of reality would wilt” (Stewart 371).

During their meeting, the Intended explains to Marlow that she knows Kurtz better than anyone else and that he is worth her eternal mourning. Marlow experiences immeasurable pity for the Intended, for whom, “Kurtz seemed to have died just yesterday” (Conrad 105). He also feels wrath at the Intended’s naiveté and her immense ignorance. That is why when asked to repeat Kurtz’s final words; Marlow cannot bring himself to say, “The horror! The horror!” and instead, tells a lie which comforts her, while simultaneously secures Kurtz’s reputation in her eyes (Conrad 99). Marlow feels resentment at Intended’s ingenuousness but he overlooks that it is in accordance with the unwritten but prevalent norms of the patriarchal society and the times. He forgets that the Intended has created a world for herself, like that of Marlow’s aunt. For him all the women are “ignorantly unaware of what the white ‘pilgrims’ (worshipping ivory), together with Kurtz, are doing to the natives in Africa” (Hay 175). The narrator wants to say that women remain alive in their artificial world only by deceiving themselves. But he does not seem to help the Intended to come out of her non-natural, illusionary and false world. With his lie that he tells to the Intended, it seems that Marlow pushes her deeper in the same gorge. Furthermore, Marlow furnishes Kurtz’s Intended with a fabricated lie, driven by his lack of confidence in the woman’s emotional resilience. In this instance, the narrator appears to align with the prevailing notion of a dominant ideology that positions women as inferior to men in various aspects: socially, ethically, racially, intellectually, and morally. Marlow refrains from disclosing the reality of Kurtz’s existence to his betrothed, as he cannot muster the courage to dismantle the moral foundation of the Intended’s belief system. Moreover, to Marlow it seems that the lady possesses what Sherwood calls the “steadiness of a saint, without an adequate capacity for evaluating the object of her devotion” (191). Kurtz’s Intended, to use Beauvoir’s phrase, has not been attributed with “mature human mentality” (216). Marlow lacks confidence in the Intended’s

suppleness. From a postcolonial-feminist perspective, it becomes apparent that symbolically, the narrator is endeavouring to shield the refined woman from the brutal reality of her prospective husband's existence. Conrad's portrayal of the Intended, coupled with his narrator's deliberate deception, underscores the marginalization of women within his narrative and their vulnerability to the stringent aesthetic presumptions of the Western culture.

The incident of Marlow's lie has been critically appraised by many critics. Garrett Stewart in his essay "Lying as Dying in *Heart of Darkness*" says, "Lying is dying. So says Marlow, and so Conrad is out to demonstrate, even at the expense of his own narrator. . . . There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies," Marlow announces early in *Heart of Darkness*, but the his consoling statement to Kurtz's devoted fiancée that her lover expired uttering her name—constitute his own lie about a dying man's last words (358). The statement shows that Marlow contaminates not only the death bed of his colleague but the world of a woman as well.

Sherwood says that Marlow, during his meeting with the Intended, sees her as "a pure soul, incapable of seeing the darkness, asking for a lie to live by about a man whose very life was a sham. Under the pressure, despite his truthful nature, he utters a howling lie at the climatic moment of their interview" (191). Sherwood believes that for Marlow, women like his aunt and the Intended "are the vehicles and protectresses of the 'ideal' of civilization and its spiritual values, however specious those values may be" (192-193). Marlow's lie finds validation in the Intended's demeanour. Upon perusing Sherwood's perspectives, it becomes evident that Conrad seeks to illustrate how individuals like Marlow are compelled to underestimate women due to their own actions. According to this perspective, women are perceived as lacking the fortitude to confront facts or reality. Another critic, Hyland says, "Marlow's response to the Intended is the result of a particular kind of anti-feminism that pervades the novella and may well reflect Conrad's own inadequate response to the feminine" (4). He believes that Marlow's lie is not only "an act of masculine contempt, but also an act of self-protection" (7).

According to Gurko's analysis, "The lie, like the imperialism to which even Kurtz is allied, is an evil thing but is redeemed, as Kurtz's ivory activities were, by a benevolent and idealistic motivation" (151). Gurko's scrutiny of Marlow's lie to the Intended points out that the Intended brings to light her receptive acquiescence to his falsehood. She embodies Europe's embrace of a pervasive lie, the very lie it perpetuates daily – the falsehood concerning the construction of Empires and the civilizing of indigenous populations. Furthermore, Marlow's lie may have been perceived as an act of goodwill, spurred by his optimistic disposition. However, from a postcolonial-feminist perspective, it is crucial to recognize that in narrating this lie, Marlow becomes ensnared once again in the myths and delusions of his presumed civilization; a civilization he ostensibly aims to disprove during his journey. Implicit in his action is the intention to confine women within the bounds of femininity – a femininity constructed and prescribed by the overarching patriarchal society, of which he himself is a component.

From a postcolonial-feminist standpoint, the aforementioned arguments resonate as true, as Marlow refrains from traversing into an alternative realm to allow reality to assume its authentic form. Instead, he distorts it once again with his falsehood. Marlow's lie underscores his own inadequacies and the deficiencies inherent in the masculine, patriarchal, and colonial domain. He neglects to contemplate whether the Intended can bear the truth, opting to furnish her with an untruth. This suggests that Marlow views it as his responsibility to let women live in their own dominion of imagination, perhaps fearing that his own assertive masculine sphere would shatter along with theirs. In his perception, the female realm is distinct and inferior to the male universe. Marlow's constructed reality remains steadfast, firmly contrasting with the disparate worlds inhabited by each of the five women encountered in the text. Conrad's narrator abides by the binary divisions established by the patriarchal-colonial framework.

Conclusion:

The portrayal of the Intended and the other female characters in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* serves as a reflection of his underlying perception of women's inherent inferiority. Marlow's stance and his assessment of the Intended effectively unveil the prevalent nineteenth-century attitudes towards women. The Intended emerges as a victim of illusions, analogous to the blindfolded figure depicted in Kurtz's painting. In the novel, the primary focus appears to be Marlow's journey into the concealed abyss lurking beneath the veneer of white complexions, represented by the agents of colonialism and white supremacy, and implicitly, the overarching Empire. This journey can be interpreted as Marlow's personal voyage of self-discovery. The environment itself has notably been tailored to a male audience, transpiring within the confines of a yawl, and all recipients of Marlow's discourse are male. This exclusion of women from the narrative reinforces the notion that women are excluded from this sphere. Utilizing the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir, it can be posited that "a fundamental ambiguity marks the feminine being[s]" in the work of Conrad (271).

It becomes apparent from the above discussion that both Marlow and Conrad construct women in a manner that confines them to a sense of comfort only within predefined societal norms and traditions. Marlow's perception of the Intended, akin to other seemingly refined women, suggests her detachment from the harsh realities of colonial times. He envisions her, along with his aunt, as inhabiting an alluring yet blinkered domain of ornate drawing rooms and adorned bedrooms, a space distanced from the authentic world. In Marlow's view, this world of women stands apart from the world of men, which is characterized by exertion, labour, work, and tangible truths. Marlow and Conrad appear to negate women and they are happy and comfortable only when these women exist within a construct meticulously shaped by patriarchal cultural frameworks. It becomes evident that the Intended falls prey to a neurotic sentimentality, driven by irrational constructs. Despite moments where Conrad's sympathy for women surfaces, yet he fails to offer an escape from their suffocating

environment. As the author's voice, Marlow critiques the lifestyles, ideologies, beliefs, and dogmas and naivety of female characters. It is significant to recognize that this world is a product of the very male community to which he belongs. This nuanced examination delves into the intricacies of how Conrad's narrative both challenges and perpetuates gender norms and the patriarchal dynamics of his time.

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