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Colonial Dissonance and the 'Subaltern Voice': A Postcolonial Re-reading of *Heart of Darkness* through Spivak and Festinger

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Abstract

This paper offers a postcolonial re-examination of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through the intersecting critical lenses of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. It interrogates the colonial epistemology that governs Marlow's narrative and highlights the deep psychological and ideological contradictions embedded in his perception of imperial violence. While Marlow witnesses the horrors of colonialism, he remains epistemically confined within the ideological boundaries of empire, rendering him incapable of truly understanding—or representing—the colonized subject. The novella thus becomes a text of silences, where indigenous voices are consistently muted, distorted, or erased. Drawing on Spivak's notion of the subaltern and Festinger's theory of internal conflict, the paper argues that Conrad's narrative not only marginalizes the African other but also exemplifies the structural and psychological silencing of colonized peoples in Western literature. By situating *Heart of Darkness* within the discourse of epistemic violence and postcolonial dissonance, this study reframes the novella as a site of both complicity and critical tension—where the limits of colonial understanding reveal the urgency of speaking, and listening to, the subaltern voice.

Key Words: Postcolonialism; Cognitive Dissonance; Subaltern; Epistemic Violence; Colonial Discourse; Marlow

Introduction

The legacy of European colonialism has left deep scars on the cultural, psychological, and epistemological fabric of the formerly colonized world. In literary studies, the colonial encounter has been repeatedly interrogated through various critical lenses, among which postcolonial theory has offered some of the most trenchant critiques. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), long considered a cornerstone of modernist literature, has simultaneously occupied a contentious place within the postcolonial canon. While praised for its narrative complexity and critique of imperialism, it has also been heavily criticized for its racist imagery and erasure of African

subjectivity. This paper proposes a re-reading of *Heart of Darkness* through the twin concepts of **cognitive dissonance** and **subalternity**, drawing especially from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). By doing so, it aims to explore the epistemic limits of the colonial mind and the structural silencing of colonized voices.

Joseph Conrad's novella is set in the heart of the Congo during the zenith of European imperialism. Told through the perspective of Charles Marlow, an English seaman who journeys upriver to find the enigmatic trader Kurtz, *Heart of Darkness* stages a psychological and philosophical confrontation with the horrors of empire. Marlow's narration—meditative, ironic, and often ambiguous—has been read as both an indictment of and an immersion in colonial logic. While he acknowledges the brutalities of imperial conquest, Marlow is unable—or unwilling—to fully extricate himself from its ideological grip. His narrative is thus marked by a profound tension: between what is seen and what can be said, between witnessing and understanding, between encountering the other and rendering that other intelligible within a colonial epistemological framework.

It is within this tension that the notion of **cognitive dissonance** becomes especially pertinent. Introduced by Leon Festinger in 1957, cognitive dissonance refers to the psychological discomfort experienced when an individual holds two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes. In the colonial context, this dissonance often arises when the ideals of European civilization—humanity, progress, rationality—are confronted with the inhumane realities of empire. Marlow's narrative exemplifies this dissonance. Though he expresses unease and revulsion at the exploitation and violence he witnesses, he repeatedly retreats into ambivalent language, metaphor, and silence. His inability to name the horror with precision, his wavering tone, and his final lie to Kurtz's Intended are all symptomatic of a deeper psychological and ideological rift. Rather than challenging the colonial system outright, Marlow's narration ultimately reaffirms its moral ambiguities, leaving intact the structures of epistemic power that render the colonized as voiceless shadows.

This leads to the second major framework of this paper: **subalternity**. Coined by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and later expanded upon by postcolonial theorists, particularly those associated with the Subaltern Studies collective, the term "subaltern" designates those who are socially, politically, and epistemically marginalized to the point of non-representation. In her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern, particularly

the colonized woman, is doubly silenced—first by the colonial discourse that denies her agency, and then by the Western intellectual who attempts to speak on her behalf. Spivak warns against the assumption that the subaltern can be easily recovered or made intelligible within dominant discourses. In the context of *Heart of Darkness*, the African characters are systematically denied voice, name, and interiority. They exist as props within Marlow's journey, as embodiments of darkness, savagery, or inscrutable otherness. Their silences are not merely narrative absences but are emblematic of a broader **epistemic violence**—the erasure of subaltern subjectivity through the mechanisms of colonial representation.

By reading *Heart of Darkness* through this Spivakian lens, this paper will argue that the novella is not only a critique of colonial brutality but also a dramatization of the **limits of colonial knowledge**. Marlow, as narrator, is caught in an epistemological bind: he can see the horror, but he cannot make sense of it outside the structures of imperial ideology. The Africans he encounters remain unintelligible within his worldview, and the narrative offers no space for their voices to emerge. This is not simply a failure of character but a structural condition of colonial discourse itself. The cognitive dissonance Marlow experiences is thus not merely psychological but deeply epistemological: it reflects the disjunction between the lived realities of empire and the ideological frameworks that seek to justify it.

Yet it would be overly simplistic to dismiss *Heart of Darkness* as merely a racist or imperialist text. As Chinua Achebe famously argued in his 1975 lecture "An Image of Africa," Conrad's portrayal of Africans as "savages" strips them of humanity and renders the text complicit in the colonial project. Achebe's critique is valid and necessary, but it also opens the door for more nuanced readings. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), suggests that Conrad's work is both inside and outside the imperialist discourse—criticizing the empire's excesses while remaining unable to fully imagine a postcolonial world. This ambivalence makes *Heart of Darkness* a fertile site for postcolonial analysis. Its narrative silences are not just failures but also symptoms of a broader epistemological crisis—one that reveals the impossibility of truly representing the subaltern within colonial structures of knowledge.

To further contextualize this reading, the paper will draw upon the concept of **epistemic closure**, particularly as it manifests in colonial literature. Coined in various forms by philosophers like Robert Nozick and adapted by political theorists such as Julian Sanchez, epistemic closure refers

to the tendency of belief systems to exclude contradictory information, thus reinforcing existing worldviews. In the colonial context, epistemic closure manifests in the refusal to acknowledge the humanity, agency, or voice of the colonized. Marlow's journey into the heart of Africa, though framed as a quest for truth, is ultimately constrained by the cognitive and ideological boundaries of empire. His failure to hear or represent the African voice is not just a narrative oversight but a profound philosophical limitation.

This paper thus brings together three interlocking theoretical frameworks—cognitive dissonance, subalternity, and epistemic closure—to offer a layered re-reading of *Heart of Darkness*. It contends that the novella dramatizes the crisis of colonial knowledge: the inability to reconcile the reality of imperial violence with the myths of civilization, and the consequent silencing of the colonized other. Marlow's narrative becomes a site of dissonance, where horror is both seen and unseen, spoken and unspeakable. In this way, *Heart of Darkness* becomes emblematic of a broader colonial condition—one in which the subaltern cannot speak because the structures of representation themselves are saturated with power.

In the chapters that follow, the paper will first elaborate on the psychological dynamics of cognitive dissonance in colonial texts, using Festinger's theory to analyze Marlow's narrative strategies. It will then turn to Spivak's concept of subalternity to interrogate the mechanisms of silencing in the novella, paying close attention to the representation of African characters. Finally, it will engage with the idea of epistemic closure to explain how colonial discourse forecloses alternative modes of knowing, thereby sustaining imperial authority. In doing so, the paper aims not only to critique the ideological operations of *Heart of Darkness* but also to explore the ethical and epistemological challenges of recovering subaltern voices in literature.

Ultimately, this study seeks to position *Heart of Darkness* as a text that both exemplifies and critiques the colonial condition. It is a narrative haunted by its own silences, marked by a dissonance it cannot resolve and a voice it cannot hear. By foregrounding the concepts of cognitive dissonance and subalternity, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature reflects—and is complicit in—the epistemic violence of empire. More importantly, it invites readers and critics alike to listen more carefully to the silences in the text, to recognize them not merely as absences, but as the residues of suppressed histories and unheard voices.

Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical methodology that combines Leon Festinger's psychological theory of *cognitive dissonance* with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *postcolonial theory of subalternity*. These frameworks are selected for their ability to illuminate both the internal psychological contradictions of the colonial narrator and the external discursive structures that marginalize the colonized subject.

Rather than relying on a traditional empirical method, the paper undertakes a close textual and discursive analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, focusing on the narrative strategies of Charles Marlow. Festinger's theory is used to trace moments of psychological discomfort and moral ambivalence in Marlow's voice, especially as he grapples with the contradictions between imperial ideology and witnessed colonial violence. Spivak's concept of the subaltern, on the other hand, is employed to interrogate the narrative's silences and omissions—those textual moments where indigenous agency is erased or rendered unintelligible.

Through this dual framework, the analysis reveals both the internal (psychological) dissonance and the external (epistemological) violence that define the colonial condition. This methodology not only allows for a deeper understanding of Marlow's conflicted consciousness but also critiques the representational limitations of colonial discourse in literary form.

Literature Review

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has long been a focal point for postcolonial critique, with scholars dissecting its complex portrayals of colonialism, identity, and power dynamics. Recent scholarship continues to explore these themes, offering fresh perspectives that enrich the understanding of the novella's enduring relevance. One such approach is seen in Yog Raj Paudel's (2022) application of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, where he critiques the narrative's reinforcement of colonial binaries. By portraying Africans as uncivilized and the Congo as a wild, unknowable landsca npe, Conrad's text, according to Paudel, bolsters the ideological foundations of colonial domination.

Building on this critique of representation, Mourad Romdhani (2022) offers a psychological and structural reading of the text through binarism and trauma. His analysis complicates the simplistic division of colonizer and colonized by revealing how both Marlow and Kurtz are destabilized by

their experiences. Romdhani's emphasis on the resilience of the unnamed black female character introduces a counterpoint to the passive depictions of African figures, suggesting subtle forms of resistance that challenge colonial narratives from within.

This re-evaluation of colonial power is echoed by Inayat Ur Rehman et al. (2025), who examine how Conrad interrogates the very foundations of Western civilization. Their study emphasizes the novella's critique of imperial moral contradictions, revealing how the ideals of civilization are subverted by the brutal realities of empire. In doing so, they contribute to a growing body of work that repositions the novella as an anti-colonial text rather than a mere reflection of imperial ideology.

Nazan Eris (2023) furthers this postcolonial inquiry by turning to questions of identity, using the Hegelian master-slave dialectic to analyze the internal conflicts of the characters. Eris reveals how Marlow and others experience a fragmentation of self under the pressures of domination and subjugation. This lens of psychological tension provides a bridge to Romdhani's earlier insights, reinforcing the notion that identity in *Heart of Darkness* is inseparable from colonial trauma.

The psychological deterioration of Kurtz, explored in detail by Mudassar Khan et al. (2023), adds another layer to the discussion. Rather than attributing Kurtz's downfall to the African wilderness, the study argues that colonialism itself—its methods, ideologies, and ethical emptiness—is the true catalyst for moral collapse. This argument reframes madness not as an external consequence, but as an intrinsic outcome of imperial enterprise, further complicating Conrad's critique of empire.

In line with this destabilization of colonial authority, Kamal Sharma and Amrit Prasad Joshi (2024) offer an ecofeminist reading of the novella. Their work draws attention to the parallel objectification of women and nature within the colonial imagination. By linking the subjugation of the environment to patriarchal and imperial control, the study introduces an intersectional perspective that expands the ethical implications of colonialism beyond human relations.

These concerns with domination and perception are taken up by Asma Yasmin (2024), who explores how colonial power reshapes the colonizer's view of the colonized. By combining Edward Said's postcolonial theory with Freudian psychoanalysis, Yasmin exposes the distortions inherent in Marlow's narrative voice. Her study reinforces earlier claims about the unreliability of

colonial representation, while also offering a deeper psychological account of imperial justification.

A more symbolic critique is advanced by Ruchi Mundeja (2021), who examines gustatory metaphors as indicative of colonial consumption. Her work connects the novella's imagery of devouring and appetite to broader themes in modernist literature, revealing how the hunger of empire is mirrored in the aesthetic structures of the text. This interpretation complements the psychoanalytic readings by highlighting how the logic of domination extends into narrative form and metaphor.

Addressing perhaps the most overt form of colonial violence, Zubair Ul Islam (2023) foregrounds the novella's pervasive racism. Through a close reading of symbolic and character representation, he lays bare the dehumanizing rhetoric used to portray African characters. His historical contextualization deepens the socio-cultural critique of the novella and anchors its aesthetic choices within the broader racial ideologies of the colonial era.

Expanding on the ideological machinery that sustains colonialism, Rubina Hussain et al. (2024) examine the influence of Darwinian thought in justifying racial hierarchies. Their study shows how Social Darwinism and Orientalism converge to legitimize imperial expansion, embedding scientific racism within the narrative's philosophical subtext. By highlighting this discursive framework, they connect the narrative to a larger system of epistemic violence that underpins colonial domination.

The wide-ranging scholarship on *Heart of Darkness* reflects its critical richness and persistent relevance within postcolonial discourse. While these recent studies have illuminated key themes—such as Orientalist representation (Paudel, 2022), the psychological impact of empire (Romdhani, 2022), the moral contradictions of civilization (Rehman et al., 2025), and even ecofeminist critique (Sharma & Joshi, 2024)—they tend to explore the novella through either general postcolonial, psychoanalytic, or symbolic frameworks. However, a significant gap persists in connecting these thematic explorations with a more focused investigation of epistemic structures, especially concerning the subaltern voice and cognitive dissonance within the colonial psyche.

Notably, while scholars have addressed the silencing of African characters or Marlow's narrative ambiguity, there is limited engagement with Gayatri Spivak's theoretical lens of subalternity in

conjunction with Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance—two powerful frameworks that together expose both the structural and psychological mechanisms of colonial epistemic violence. Moreover, most analyses isolate either the colonizer's internal conflict (such as Kurtz's moral collapse) or the colonized's representation, rarely examining the interplay between cognitive and epistemic dissonances within the narrative voice itself.

This paper seeks to intervene precisely in that lacuna. By pairing Spivak's notion of the subaltern's unhearable voice with Festinger's psychological theory of dissonance, it offers an interdisciplinary framework to analyze Marlow's narration as both a site of internal colonial conflict and a mechanism of representational erasure. Through this lens, the study will argue that Marlow's fragmented consciousness reflects a deeper epistemic crisis—a failure not just to express or act, but to know the colonial other outside imperial paradigms. Thus, the current paper contributes a novel theoretical synthesis to *Heart of Darkness* studies, foregrounding how colonial discourse operates not only through external domination but also through the dissonant structures of perception, narration, and knowledge.

Discussion

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the psychological and epistemological conflicts experienced by Marlow are not merely personal dilemmas but emblematic of the broader dissonance embedded in the colonial project. Through the lens of Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance—which posits that individuals experience psychological distress when confronted with contradictory beliefs or experiences—and Gayatri Spivak's notion of subalternity, Marlow's narrative emerges not simply as a recounting of events but as a site of epistemic rupture. His shifting perspectives, rhetorical evasions, and narrative fragmentation reflect an unresolved struggle to reconcile the ideological inheritance of imperialism with the horrifying realities of colonial violence. These narrative instabilities not only expose the psychological cost of empire but also enact the very silencing and misrepresentation of the colonial subject that Spivak identifies as the structural condition of subalternity.

Marlow's journey begins with an internalized investment in the civilizing mission—a belief that he is carrying the torch of progress into a savage land. Early in the novella, he recalls his childhood

fascination with maps, referring to the Congo as a "blank space of delightful mystery" (Conrad, 10). The phrase is telling: it reveals the colonial gaze's desire to erase indigenous presence in order to inscribe its own authority. Africa is not merely unknown but imagined as empty, inviting intervention. This spatial erasure corresponds to what Spivak identifies as the imperial production of knowledge that renders the subaltern voiceless: a region without history, culture, or agency, waiting to be spoken for. Marlow's romantic vision of exploration, however, is quickly destabilized by his experiences on the ground. The brutality of the Company's operations—its chain-gangs, starvation, and senseless violence—introduces a moral contradiction that unsettles his inherited worldview.

This contradiction surfaces starkly when Marlow encounters what he calls the "grove of death," where enslaved Africans, having served their purpose, are discarded like waste. His description—"Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth… nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation" (Conrad, 20)—reveals both his horror and his narrative detachment. The choice of words—"shapes," "shadows"—evokes a dehumanized abstraction, eliding individual identities. This rhetorical strategy, while perhaps unintentional, functions as a psychological buffer, allowing Marlow to register the suffering he sees without fully confronting its ethical implications. Such distancing, from a Festingerian perspective, is a coping mechanism to reduce dissonance: he cannot simultaneously hold the belief in the righteousness of empire and acknowledge its devastating consequences without experiencing profound psychological distress. Thus, his language performs the contradiction he cannot consciously resolve.

Marlow's growing disillusionment is further reflected in his interactions with European agents, whose conduct increasingly contradicts the purported ideals of imperialism. The Chief Accountant, for instance, is described as impeccably dressed and proud of keeping flawless records amid chaos and death. Marlow notes with biting irony that the Accountant works unbothered by "the groans of the sick," admiring how he maintains a "starched collar and clean cuffs" (Conrad, 23). This grotesque juxtaposition of bureaucratic discipline and human suffering underscores the moral vacuity of colonial enterprise. Marlow's awareness of this hypocrisy is evident in his tone, yet he does not act to challenge or distance himself from the system. He critiques but continues to serve the Company, revealing a deeper tension between recognition and complicity. This failure to act

on moral awareness is symptomatic of the dissonance Festinger describes, where behavior is adjusted not to align with ethical insight but to maintain social and institutional belonging.

Moreover, Marlow's fragmented narration—his digressions, ironies, and repeated disclaimers—further signifies the instability of his epistemic position. He frequently undercuts his own authority as a narrator, admitting the unreliability of language: "It seems I am trying to tell you a dream... and trying to make you see" (Conrad, 30). This metaphor of the dream aligns with the psychological blurring that occurs when one is caught between incompatible realities. The colonial ideology he once embraced becomes increasingly surreal and indefensible, but he lacks the conceptual vocabulary—and perhaps the political courage—to articulate an alternative. In this sense, Marlow becomes an embodiment of colonial ambivalence, trapped between witnessing atrocity and representing it within the discursive bounds of empire.

Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—is echoed here not through direct engagement with the colonized voice, but through the very absence and distortion of that voice in Marlow's account. His evasions, his failure to name or listen to African characters, and his fixation on Kurtz as the only voice worth recovering all reflect the systemic erasure that Spivak theorizes. The African characters remain largely silent, seen but not heard, their suffering narrated but never narrated by them. Marlow's narration thus reproduces the colonial structure of knowledge even as it attempts to critique it—a fact that contributes to his internal fragmentation and deepens the cognitive dissonance he experiences.

Ultimately, Marlow's narrative is not a triumph of enlightenment but a record of epistemic failure. He returns from the Congo, not with truth, but with a lie he feels compelled to tell—the false comfort offered to Kurtz's Intended. This final act of narrative suppression mirrors his earlier rhetorical evasions and confirms the impossibility of bearing witness to colonial horror without recourse to distortion. His dissonance is not resolved but deferred, and in that deferral, the colonial machinery continues to operate through silences, half-truths, and the persistent marginalization of the subaltern.

Kurtz emerges in *Heart of Darkness* not only as a central figure in the plot but as the most potent embodiment of the colonial project's internal contradictions—both ideological and psychological. He is first introduced through a series of idealized descriptions: a man of immense talent and moral ambition, who has written a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage

Customs. The report, however, concludes with the chilling handwritten postscript, "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, 50). This textual disjunction between the polished rhetoric of humanitarian imperialism and the raw violence of extermination is itself a manifestation of cognitive dissonance—mirroring, in extremis, the same epistemic fracture Marlow experiences. In Kurtz, the dissonance is not mitigated but magnified, and ultimately, it overwhelms him. His descent into madness—marked by his absolute domination over the local population, his self-deification, and his indulgence in rituals of terror—reveals what happens when imperial ideology is pushed to its logical extreme. Kurtz becomes the pure product of colonial logic: a man who begins with the language of civilization and ends with the logic of annihilation.

Marlow's reaction to Kurtz is as contradictory as the man himself. Despite being acutely aware of Kurtz's atrocities—his collection of severed heads on stakes, his use of violence to inspire awe and submission—Marlow insists that Kurtz "had something to say" (Conrad, 66). This ambiguous defense reveals Marlow's own investment in finding some redeeming truth within the colonial narrative, even as it disintegrates around him. His defense is not based on reason or ethics but on an emotional need for coherence in the face of moral chaos. Kurtz's final words—"The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 69)—are delivered without context or explanation, yet Marlow treats them as profound, suggesting they constitute a final vision or judgment. However, his refusal to interpret these words, his retreat into abstraction, signals his continued inability to confront the full implications of Kurtz's collapse. From a Festingerian perspective, this is a classic maneuver to avoid dissonance: by assigning meaning to the phrase while withholding interpretation, Marlow preserves its significance without confronting its content.

This evasion is also epistemological in nature, echoing Spivak's claim that colonial discourse often silences the voices it claims to represent. Just as the African characters in the novella are denied speech, so too is Kurtz's final utterance stripped of narrative clarity. It becomes a symbol to be admired rather than a truth to be interrogated. In refusing to give Kurtz's words a definite meaning, Marlow perpetuates the colonial logic of deferral and mystification, which ultimately serves to preserve imperial ideology under the guise of moral ambiguity.

The final and perhaps most telling moment of cognitive dissonance arrives when Marlow returns to Europe and visits Kurtz's Intended. She, unlike Marlow, remains entirely embedded in the imperial fiction of nobility, purpose, and sacrifice. When she asks Marlow what Kurtz's final words

were, he lies: “The last word he pronounced was—your name” (Conrad, 72). This deliberate fabrication does more than spare her grief; it restores the illusion of meaning to a narrative that has unraveled in horror. Marlow’s lie preserves the romantic myth of colonial martyrdom and avoids exposing the moral vacuum at the heart of the empire. From Festinger’s theoretical standpoint, this is an archetypal act of dissonance reduction: faced with the unbearable conflict between the truth he has witnessed and the ideals society demands he uphold, Marlow alters the story to make it congruent with prevailing beliefs. The lie, in this sense, is not just for her—it is for him. It is the final act in a long series of evasions that allow him to reintegrate into society without having to articulate the disintegration of its moral foundations.

This moment also reinforces Spivak’s insight about the epistemic structures of imperialism. Just as Marlow silences the African characters by narrating over their experiences, so too does he overwrite Kurtz’s final self-revelation with a narrative that conforms to European sensibilities. In both cases, the subaltern and the fallen imperial agent are denied the opportunity to speak on their own terms. Marlow’s narrative thus emerges not as a medium of truth but as a mechanism of ideological containment—reproducing the very silencing it pretends to critique.

In the end, the figure of Kurtz, rather than offering resolution or revelation, crystallizes the dissonance that pervades *Heart of Darkness*. His madness and death do not provide closure but expose the void beneath imperial discourse—a void that Marlow cannot fill, only obscure. The colonial project, as revealed through Kurtz, collapses under the weight of its own contradictions, and Marlow’s narrative becomes the psychological and epistemological debris left in its wake.

Language in *Heart of Darkness* becomes both a tool and a trap for Marlow—a medium through which he attempts to understand his experience, and a mechanism through which he obscures it. The inconsistencies, hesitations, and rhetorical evasions that characterize his narration are not stylistic flourishes but signs of profound psychological and epistemological rupture. Time and again, Marlow resorts to vague and abstract descriptors—“unspeakable secrets,” “inconceivable mystery,” “indescribable horror”—that point not to the limits of expression, but to the limits of understanding itself. These linguistic gaps, where words fail or falter, index a deeper epistemic crisis: Marlow can no longer frame what he has witnessed within the familiar logic of colonial rationality. What he encounters in the Congo not only defies articulation but exposes the hollowness of the civilizing mission's language.

This crisis is central to the colonial psyche's dissonance. As Festinger posits, when one's actions or experiences contradict their core beliefs, individuals experience intense psychological discomfort. Marlow, committed to the ideals of European enlightenment and progress, confronts realities that shatter these convictions. Rather than resolve this conflict through confrontation, he displaces it onto language—retreating into metaphors, contradictions, and abstractions that allow him to speak without saying, to narrate without truly revealing. His storytelling thus becomes a defensive gesture, a rhetorical strategy for managing inner discord.

The failure of language also reflects a broader epistemological limitation that aligns with Gayatri Spivak's argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak contends that the subaltern—the colonized subject positioned outside hegemonic power structures—cannot truly be heard within colonial discourse, not because they are mute, but because the systems of representation available to the dominant culture do not recognize their voice as meaningful. In *Heart of Darkness*, the African characters exist largely as silent presences. They populate the landscape as laborers, bodies, shadows—visible but voiceless. When they do "speak," their utterances are reduced to cries, chants, or incoherent sounds, filtered entirely through Marlow's narrative lens. For instance, when describing a native helmsman's death, Marlow remarks, "He had no restraint, he had no restraint—just like Kurtz" (Conrad, 60), collapsing the individuality of the African into a metaphor that reinforces European fears of savagery. The native presence is thus appropriated as symbolic fodder for Marlow's internal drama rather than as a site of independent meaning.

This representational silencing is not incidental—it is a structural necessity of colonial discourse. To maintain the fiction of Western superiority, the colonized must remain unknowable, untranslatable, inarticulable. The very grammar of empire depends on this epistemic asymmetry. Recognizing the humanity, voice, or agency of the African Other would destabilize the ideological foundation of imperialism. For Marlow, this recognition would also heighten the cognitive dissonance he already experiences. To truly hear—to truly listen—would necessitate the abandonment of the myths that sustain his identity and worldview. Instead, his narrative becomes a prolonged act of avoidance, marked by rhetorical opacity and narrative digressions.

Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial ambivalence provides an apt lens here. Bhabha argues that colonial discourse is inherently split, producing uncertainty and anxiety in its attempt to maintain control. It simultaneously desires and fears the colonized subject, constructing the Other as both

inferior and dangerously powerful. Marlow's storytelling is suffused with this ambivalence. He is drawn to the Congo's darkness yet recoils from it, fascinated by Kurtz's power yet disturbed by his fall. His narrative oscillates between moments of insight and lapses into vagueness, never arriving at full coherence. This vacillation is not a failure of storytelling but a symptom of the colonial condition—a reflection of the epistemic limits imposed by empire.

Ultimately, the silence of the subaltern in *Heart of Darkness* is not natural but constructed—reinforced by the linguistic and psychological strategies of the narrator. Marlow's cognitive dissonance manifests not only in what he says but in what he cannot bring himself to say. The novella becomes, therefore, a document not of colonial mastery, but of colonial breakdown—a record of a consciousness unraveling under the weight of its own contradictions, seeking refuge in silence, metaphor, and myth. And in doing so, it reveals the deeper failure of colonial knowledge: its inability to truly know the people it claims to dominate.

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Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial ambivalence provides an apt lens here. Bhabha argues that colonial discourse is inherently split, producing uncertainty and anxiety in its attempt to maintain control. It simultaneously desires and fears the colonized subject, constructing the Other as both inferior and dangerously powerful. Marlow's storytelling is suffused with this ambivalence. He is drawn to the Congo's darkness yet recoils from it, fascinated by Kurtz's power yet disturbed by his fall. His narrative oscillates between moments of insight and lapses into vagueness, never arriving at full coherence. This vacillation is not a failure of storytelling but a symptom of the colonial condition—a reflection of the epistemic limits imposed by empire.

Ultimately, the silence of the subaltern in *Heart of Darkness* is not natural but constructed—reinforced by the linguistic and psychological strategies of the narrator. Marlow's cognitive

dissonance manifests not only in what he says but in what he cannot bring himself to say. The novella becomes, therefore, a document not of colonial mastery, but of colonial breakdown—a record of a consciousness unraveling under the weight of its own contradictions, seeking refuge in silence, metaphor, and myth. And in doing so, it reveals the deeper failure of colonial knowledge: its inability to truly know the people it claims to dominate.

Eventually, the unresolved cognitive dissonance that permeates Marlow's narrative gestures toward a more profound epistemic crisis—one that signals not just the failure of a man, but the failure of an entire imperial worldview to generate coherent or ethical knowledge about the world it claims to govern. Marlow's psychological discomfort is not merely introspective or private; it is emblematic of the colonial subject's fractured consciousness, caught between inherited structures of power and the unassimilable reality of colonial violence. As he struggles to articulate his experience, it becomes increasingly evident that the imperial framework through which he views the world is insufficient, riddled with contradictions and unable to encompass the human complexities he encounters.

This epistemic collapse is underscored by the narrative's structure itself. The story of Marlow is not presented directly, but mediated through another narrator, whose own framing adds layers of ambiguity and detachment. The outer narrator, who listens passively aboard the *Nellie*, rarely interjects, and when he does, his remarks reflect a reluctance—or inability—to grasp the full implications of Marlow's tale. This nested narration does not merely frame the story as a recollection; it reinforces the isolation and unintelligibility of Marlow's experience within imperial discourse. Even among fellow Europeans, Marlow is not truly heard. His narrative, suffused with unease and hesitation, falls into the same silence that characterizes the fate of the subaltern—the difference being that Marlow's voice is not suppressed by others, but by the limits of the worldview he inhabits.

The ending of *Heart of Darkness* encapsulates this unresolved crisis. After journeying to the metaphorical heart of empire's darkness and witnessing the dissolution of its moral and rational pretensions in Kurtz, Marlow does not return transformed with clear insight. Instead, he retreats into evasions, offering false comfort to Kurtz's Intended and ending his story in a haze of ambiguity. His concluding vision of the Thames—"seemed to lead into the heart of an immense

darkness" (Conrad, 72)—reverses the trope of illumination. Europe itself becomes a site of obscurity, a space where clarity is not achieved but permanently deferred.

Here, Spivak's theory of epistemic violence becomes especially illuminating. The colonial subject, even when reflexive or critical, is bound within a discursive regime that prevents the production of liberatory knowledge. Marlow's self-awareness is limited; he senses the abyss beneath imperial justifications but lacks the epistemic tools to fully articulate or escape them. As such, his narration does not dismantle empire—it reproduces its anxieties, its contradictions, and its failures. The colonial subject, in this formulation, is epistemologically stranded: capable of seeing the cracks in the system, but incapable of speaking beyond it.

Thus, Marlow's crisis is not simply a moral reckoning; it is a breakdown of knowing itself. His fragmented narrative becomes a testament to colonialism's deeper failure—not only to rule ethically but to understand meaningfully. His journey ends not in revelation but in recursive obscurity, and his voice, like those he fails to hear, is absorbed into the ambient silence of imperial discourse. The dissonance remains, haunting and unresolved.

Conclusion

In re-reading *Heart of Darkness* through the intersecting frameworks of cognitive dissonance and subalternity, this study has sought to uncover the layered and often contradictory operations of colonial discourse as embodied in the narrative of Charles Marlow. Far from being a straightforward account of imperial critique or moral enlightenment, Conrad's novella emerges as a site of profound psychological and epistemological rupture—a text where knowledge falters, voice collapses, and meaning is deferred.

At the center of this collapse stands Marlow, a narrator fractured by the tension between what he sees and what he is ideologically prepared to understand. His experiences in the Congo generate intense cognitive dissonance, a psychological disquiet born from the irreconcilability between the imperial ideals he upholds and the brutal realities he encounters. Rather than resolve this tension, Marlow evades it—through abstraction, ambiguity, and, ultimately, silence. As Festinger's theory helps illuminate, these evasions are not moral failures alone, but structural attempts to restore psychic equilibrium in the face of epistemic disintegration.

Layered over this psychological reading is the more urgent question of voice—of who can speak and be heard within colonial discourse. As Spivak argues, the subaltern is not simply silenced but rendered inaudible by the very systems that presume to represent them. In *Heart of Darkness*, the African characters do not speak; when they appear, they are muted, reduced to shadows, objects, or metaphors in the colonial imagination. Their absence is not accidental, but constitutive of a discourse that positions them outside the realm of intelligibility. Marlow's inability—or refusal—to listen reflects not only a personal limitation but the wider colonial incapacity to hear the Other without distortion.

By placing Marlow's narrative at the intersection of these two frameworks, this study has shown that *Heart of Darkness* is not only a chronicle of imperial violence but also a dramatization of the colonial subject's epistemic crisis. The novella does not offer clear critique nor cathartic resolution; rather, it stages the dissonance that underpins all colonial knowledge production—a dissonance that manifests in language, narrative structure, character psychology, and representational silence.

Indeed, the recursive structure of the text—the story within a story, the layered voices, the narrative hesitations—mirrors the looping logic of colonial ideology itself. The framing device aboard the *Nellie* reinforces the detachment and containment of Marlow's testimony, suggesting that even within Europe, his voice is only partially heard, partially believed. The truth of empire, as revealed through both Kurtz and Marlow, cannot be spoken directly; it emerges in ellipses, lies, and metaphors. And in that inability to speak plainly or to listen fully, Conrad's novella exemplifies the colonial condition: one that knows only how to dominate, not how to understand.

This study does not attempt to recuperate Marlow as a postcolonial hero, nor does it reduce the text to an imperial artifact. Rather, it reveals *Heart of Darkness* as a narrative suspended in tension—a space where critique and complicity collide. The novella's silences, far from being narrative failures, are symptomatic of the deeper impossibility of colonial representation. Marlow's dissonance, his linguistic evasions, and his epistemic paralysis become emblematic of the imperial psyche at its breaking point.

In conclusion, *Heart of Darkness* is not simply a story about going into Africa. It is a story about the limits of seeing, knowing, and speaking under empire. It is a story where the subaltern cannot speak, and where the colonizer cannot listen—not because they are physically incapable, but because the structures of power that shape their world make such acts unintelligible. In revealing

this, the novella remains disturbingly relevant, challenging readers to interrogate the epistemologies they inherit and the silences they perpetuate.

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