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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Fakhimi Anbaran, F. (2016). Multiple perspectives toward women in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness: a feministic overview. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 66, 129-134. <https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.66.129>

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# Multiple Perspectives Toward Women in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: A Feministic Overview

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**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Feminism

**ABSTRACT.** Undoubtedly, in spite of all those efforts done during the years, the mentality towards the superiority of male over female is still being reflected in the works of art written by men. Joseph Conrad, the Polish author, who wrote great masterpieces in English, is not an exception. His great work of art, *Heart of Darkness*, reflects multiple perspectives towards women. By applying a Feminist approach towards this novel, this article tends to present an analytical overview of the mentality of men towards women in the written work of art, *Heart of Darkness*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*"It is no longer acceptable to discuss women's rights as separate from human rights."*  
-Hillary Rodham Clinton, 2005

Women, during history, have always been a subject to decay, an object to be possessed by men and in the service of their pleasure. The reason of this superiority seems to be unknown since their creation has been mentioned as equal in Holy Scriptures.

Gender discrimination was not conspicuous till the time literature started to have an important role in the life of people, because as Booker (1995) states, "... literature plays a central role in the development of social attitudes toward women and of women's attitude toward themselves" (89). Afterwards, literature commenced to be in the hand of power to slake his desire. As Judith Fetterley (1997) believes, "literature is political" (564); accordingly, in order to decode the role of policy in literature, one needs to take a different look at literature, as Fetterley (1997) continues,

Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects. To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change.... feminist criticism provides that point of view and embodies that consciousness [needed for revealing the hidden part of the work of art]. (569)

So, as it is seen, a feministic overview towards a work of art can properly show the scale of discrimination which has been provided, especially by men, towards women by knowing which the movement towards "changing the [improper] culture that the literature reflects" can be begun.

Confronting with such literature mentioned above, one faces the system of patriarchy or patriarchal system and the movement of feminism against it. Chris Weedon's definition of patriarchy in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987) tells us that,

The term 'patriarchal' refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organisation of procreation to the internalised norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning given to biological sexual difference. (qtd in Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, 2006: 3)

Nowadays, for sure, feminism does not keep silence encountering with this kind of system because every single piece of writing by men tends to be against women, consciously or unconsciously; as Cora Kaplan states, "men's writing across discourses, as feminism has rightly argued, constructs a range of denigrating ideological representations of 'woman', in order to attach a virtuous masculinity to a miscellany of valorized concepts—aesthetic, philosophical, political or scientific"(753-754). As a result, especially male writers use the existence of women to improve and empower the existence of men so "when we get to feminism" according to Julie Rivkin (2004), we "will encounter feminists who speak of the "discourse of patriarchy," the set of ways of thinking and of practicing language that lend coherence to male rule in society"(55). The word "feminist" itself is of high importance because as Margaret Walters (2005) quotes from dictionary "the word 'feminist' is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women'" (2); accordingly, a feminist plays a key role in feministic movement. Being a woman, in its place, by an overlook on the binary opposition of male/female, has no definite meaning in itself and for itself. Spivak (2000) argues that, "my own definition of woman is very simple. It rests on the word 'man'" (477). This centrality of men as Roman Selden (1997) says, causes that "he is [becomes] the 'one', she the 'other'" (127).

Based on what have been discussed so far, this study, by applying a feministic overview, tends to decipher the unconscious or purposeful perspective of a male writer- Joseph Conrad- towards women in his work- *Heart of Darkness*- in particular, and in the world, in general, which reflects the overview of the unconscious mind of the male over female.

## 2. DISCUSSION

Joseph Conrad, one of the greatest novelists of the modern age, was born in 3 December 1857 in Poland, but then became a British Subject in 1886. Most of his writings, as a result, reflect the spirit of his age in England and the communities which were in close contact with England or were under its domination. *Heart of Darkness*, a prominent novel of all ages so far, in one point, reflects the mysteries of imperialism in contact with Africa; on the other hand, hidden in the deep layers, it shows male's perspectives toward women from the viewpoint of the narrator, or better to say writer as a god who has created the narrator of the story.

*Heart of Darkness* is the story of darkness both in the heart of Africa and in the heart of men facing women. Male characters of the story, while facing females, mostly have a bird-like view, observing them from sky as superior creatures, starting to degrade them. These multiple perspectives are tried to be discussed in this paper from this section on as the following:

**I. Women as Belonging:** Believing in the system of patriarchy, the dominance of men over women motivates one, especially man, to look down on women as his property. Anna Yeatman (1990) states that, "under the condition of household economy wives, children, and household servants were located within the private property of masculine individuals" (287). This view of man over woman is clearly seen in the novel when the narrator describes Kurtz, "You should have heard the disinterred body of Mr. Kurtz saying, 'My Intended.'" (99) This sense of possession is mentioned dominantly in the novel, as "'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—' everything belonged to him," (100) and "my Intended, my station, my career, my ideas...." (142). The possessive adjectives hence reflect the idea of possession projected from men to women in this novel.

**II. Women as an Object for Sexual Pleasure:** Looking deep into the philosophy of partnership or marriage and putting aside the conventional convincing mottos of men towards this phenomenon, nearly all men confess that one of the main reasons for marriage or partnership is sex or pleasure. But for women, it seems to be a kind of "security" as it is believed by Stephanie Hodgson-Wright (2006) that

Women had no recourse to law for equality of pay and conditions, and married women had no legal independence from their husbands. This latter condition was exacerbated by the fact that it was very difficult for women to achieve economic

independence, and so marriage was one of the few ways in which women could secure their future. (4)

These views of sexual objectivity of women by men are frequently seen in this novel as the narrator describes the African mistress erotically,

And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. 'She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step.... 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. (126)

This erotic description of mistress continues for three pages in which it seems that the narrator tries to slake his sexual attraction toward the mistress. This perspective toward women keeps them away from reality as Ian Watt believes,

It therefore follows that, merely by allotting women a leisure role, society has in effect excluded them from discovering reality; so it is by no choice or fault of hers that the Intended inhabits an unreal world Marlow's opinion of leisured women makes them negative examples of the idea that work is the basis of the individual's sense of reality;... [The Intended] is armoured by the invincible credulity produced by the unreality of the public rhetoric. (qtd in Nina Pelikan Straus, 2004: 204)

**III. General Accusation about Women:** Men's views toward irrationality or incompleteness of women are reflected in most literary works as in *Heart of Darkness* when we read they are "out of touch" and "distasteful;" "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be," (22) and "'I've been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work.'" (34)

These parts underquestion the rationality of women; furthermore, it is obvious that it reflects the idea of the writer and reveals his unconscious or maybe conscious attitude, which, in its place, reflects the attitude of men toward women.

**IV. Woman as an Angel in the House:** People are all familiar with this famous expression, "angels in the house" which refers to women and puts them as housewives in the house to do laundry, breed children, and, the most important of all, to serve husband and be a follower of his order. These kinds of expressions, for sure, are made by men as Habib (2005) states, "indeed, the depiction of women in male literature – as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures – was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender" (667). There would be a question: why are men able to use this ideology for themselves and against women? The answer to this question is not difficult, because as Nancy Hartsock (1990) says, "power is associated firmly with the male and masculinity;" (157) that's why all men try to keep this power in their hand and do not let women get their right because if women get their rights, the power would equally be contributed between sexes; as a result, there would not be a sole power of one sex, especially men, to torture women. That is why, recently, women started to get back their power under the flag of feminism to stop this oppression, as Judith Butler (2002) believes,

The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form

discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination.(6)

Kurtz's fiancée in the novel is described as a naïve woman who is faithful to Kurtz and believes strongly in his love. She, as an angel in the house, is quite far away from reality and seems to live in her dreams. Though some years have passed since Kurtz died, she has not got married to anybody and still mourning his death,

She was in mourning. It was more than a year since his death, more than a year since the news came; she seemed as though she would remember and mourn forever. She took both my hands in hers and murmured, 'I had heard you were coming.' I noticed she was not very young—I mean not girlish. She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering. (155)

This indirect description of the behavior of woman is quite patriarchal and shows the expectation of a patriarchal system from women.

**V. Women as Vicious Creatures:** When Marlow goes to Company's office to take the job as a riverboat captain, he faces women and describes them as witches working in the Company,

Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me— still knitting with downcast eyes—and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still, and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella-cover, and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room; (16)

and

She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. AVE! Old knitter of black wool. MORITURI TE SALUTANT. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way. (18)

Furthermore, Marlow's description of the African mistress portrays a vicious person from whom the Russian trader scares of and who, as a leader, tempts the natives to riot against pilgrims, preventing them to take Kurtz away,

She turned away slowly, walked on, following the bank, and passed into the bushes to the left. Once only her eyes gleamed back at us in the dusk of the thickets before she disappeared. "If she had offered to come aboard I really think I would have tried to shoot her," said the man of patches, nervously. (127)

And further it is said, "she put out her hands, shouted something, and all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance." (140) These descriptions from within the novel show that how the mistress has been portrayed as a vicious character.

**VI. Women as Naïve Creatures:** Marlow, as the narrator of the story, portrays his own aunt and Kurtz's fiancée as two naïve characters in the story. His aunt believes in Imperialism and thinks that Imperialism does its best to bring civilization to countries and wipe out suffering and savage life. Further in the novel, he describes Kurtz's fiancée who, in spite of Kurtz's long separation from her and choosing an African mistress, thought that Kurtz loved her till the end of his life, so she chooses to mourn his death, though more than one year have passed,

She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, 'I—I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves.' But while we were still shaking hands, such a look of awful desolation came upon her face that I perceived she was one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time," (155)

and be faithful toward him. Both Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's fiancée seem to be quite away from reality in life.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As it is discussed in this paper, a work of art which is written by a male writer carries the idea of 'man being a centre' and 'woman being an other', whether intentionally or unconscious, to continue the process of oppression of woman. What a work of art, nowadays, tends to do is to internalize the sense of inferiority of women and superiority of men in order to control and marginalize the role of women. Thomas A. Schmitz (2007) properly deciphers this ideology of men when he mentions,

In Western history and thought, "human" has always been equated with "male" (as a term such as "mankind" suggests). Women were defined as "the other," in opposition and contrast to men, and this alterity was usually perceived as being deficient: women are not human beings in the full sense of the term. In philosophy, art, and literature, the woman usually is the object toward which the male subject directs his gaze and his desire. (177)

What a reader gets from this paper is to get the ways men use these ideologies or the way they look at female so that men can take advantage of women. These ideologies include interpolating the role of women as 'other', or looking woman as his property, sexual object, or obedient creature, being 'an an Angel in the House,' which man uses for his own benefits. It is highly important for women or female writers to recognize the ways by which men are used to torturing women and to try to block this process.

At last, we should be hopeful that one day woman gains her right all over the world, from eastern communities to those in the west, and as Rousseau believes one day "he is [really considered] notorious as the philosopher who declared that woman is made specially to please man" (qtd in Deutscher, 2002: 5).

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