

“Gaze” and “Projection”: The Visual Phenomenon and Postcolonial Interpretation in Heart of Darkness

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Abstract: Since its 1899 publication, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has been a canonical text for postcolonial and literary criticism, with its narrative and connotations sparking ongoing scholarly discussions. Narrated by Marlow, the novel implies a colonial gaze at Africa and embedded power and ideology, an aspect often overlooked. Using postcolonial criticism and Lacan’s gaze theory, this paper analyzes the novel’s visual representations and exposure of colonial ideology in four sections. First, from narrative focalization, it explores Marlow’s visual fascination with Africa, rooted in curiosity and embodying colonial stereotypes and domination. Second, based on gaze theory, it deconstructs Marlow’s visual interactions with Africa’s landscapes and natives. Third, linking visual projection to colonial voyeurism, it examines Marlow’s connection with Africa through visual projection and its relation to colonial power. The conclusion summarizes the analyses and verifies that the visual perspective is an effective lens to understand the postcolonial society in the novel and aids critical inquiries into power, identity, and cultural identification.

1. Introduction

Heart of Darkness is Joseph Conrad’s most controversial classic work. For more than a hundred years, except for exploring core topics such as colonial power structures and cultural identity, many scholars has also paid attention to the visual writing and “gaze” dimension and visual features of novels. Ian Watt (1979) emphasized visual sensibility^[1]. Bruce Johnson (1988) focused on “Conrad’s return to primordial perception”^[2]. Chinua Achebe (1997) denounced the novel’s stereotypical portrayal of Africa^[3]. Their visual oriented analyses pioneer postcolonial research on the colonial gaze. Their work verifies that Conrad’s “delayed decoding” shapes the reader’s perceptual experience, and pure visual perception is unattainable.

This paper takes visual perception as a starting point, adopts Lacanian Gaze Theory and relevant perceptual studies. It scrutinizes Marlow’s visual perception and projection, explores his visual interactions with African elements, and analyzes how colonial contexts shape visual dynamics to propose an innovative framework for postcolonial themes. Centered on the gaze, it explores ideological implications behind visual phenomena and their connections to subjectivity with Lacanian theory. It analyzes characters’ voyeuristic inclinations and visual obsessions, unpacks the psychological core of gazing practices, and reveals postcolonial society’s complexities and contradictions in the text.

2. Lacanian Gaze Theory

At the core of Lacan's theory of the gaze lies the constitutive effect of the Other upon the subject. For Lacan, the subject achieves self-awareness and identity construction through the gaze of the Other. Inheriting and extending Freud's psychoanalytic framework, the theory transcends mere physical sight to become "a profound symbolic and psychological mechanism central to the formation of the ego and subjective identity"^[4].

From a visual perspective, Lacan studies the scopic instincts underlying voyeurism and exhibitionism, re-examining the act of seeing from the framework of the gaze and moving beyond superficial empirical analysis. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan argues that the "seeing eye" is inherently limited and vulnerable within the visual field and stresses the preexistence of the gaze: "We have to posit the prior existence of the gaze—I look from a single point, yet in my being I am seen from all sides"^[4] (Lacan, 72). The disparity and tension between the eye and the gaze give rise to what Lacan terms the "scopic drive" (78), "an originary human desire for endless looking that never attaches to a fixed or permanent object" (112–113). Furthermore, the gaze destabilizes the viewing subject, who can never fully reconcile itself with the gaze's disciplining force. "The gaze may assail the subject and plunge it into acute shame" (83–84), trapping the viewer "caught, manipulated and ensnared within the visual field, with the potential to annihilate the subject's vision and self-perception" (88). Accordingly, Lacan conceptualizes the gaze as a form of psychological projection: though the gaze has no tangible omnipotent essence, its imagined reality and mythic embodiment persist. His pessimistic observation that "when one reflects on the ubiquity of the evil eye, no trace can be found anywhere of a good or blessing eye" (92) testifies to the pervasiveness of malicious gazing. Conrad's depiction of gazing in *Heart of Darkness* exemplifies this theoretical feature and provides an ideal textual medium for reading the novel through combined lens of Lacanian theory and postcolonial criticism.

3. Gaze upon the Other: Marlow's Visual Obsession and Colonial Stereotypes

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's narration is more than a factual depiction of Africa; it manifests a distinct "visual obsession" rooted in colonial vision. Stemming from the colonial gaze directed at Africa as the Other, such obsession embodies stereotyped representation and hierarchical domination embedded in colonial discourse. As Kimberly J. Devlin (1994) observes, "Conrad's writing is endowed with striking visual qualities, which find full expression in Marlow's narrative"^[5] (Devlin, 19). From his childhood fascination with maps to his firsthand experience in Africa in adulthood, Marlow's observations consistently reveal his deep visual obsession on the continent.

"When I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there... But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after."^[6] (P11)

As implied by the opening narration, Marlow's visual obsession originates from his youthful fascination with unmarked blank spaces on maps, which symbolize unknown lands and boundless exploratory possibilities. His wanderlust evolves from an affective fixation constructed through visual representation. In his autobiography *A Personal Record*, Conrad attributes his youthful longing for overseas travel to a kind of "transgressive impulse", naming it "the rashness of childish daring" which "came back to my mature mind"^[7] (Conrad, 1998: 27). This visual allurements rooted in childhood persists into adulthood and drives Marlow's expedition to Africa.

“It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself, they can’t trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water—steamboats! Why shouldn’t I try to get charge of one? I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me.” (P11–12)

Marlow’s visual obsession thus shifts from abstract yearning for blank cartographic spaces to concrete fascination with African landscapes, epitomized by the continent’s great river figured as an alluring yet lethal snake. This personalized visual imagination blends innocent juvenile curiosity with colonial prejudice that frames Africa as an enigmatic, perilous “Other”. Whether manifested in his childhood fancy of blank maps or adult captivation with the river’s snake image, this transgressive visual temptation lingers and governs his desires.

Comparing himself to a vulnerable bird ensnared by a snake, Marlow implies passive entrapment by African scenery. While the object of his fixation shifts from empty map space to tangible geographic symbols, the underlying psychological mechanism remains identical: both invite subjective imaginative projection. Blank cartographic space and the visualized river alike accommodate fantasy projection and signify Africa’s ontological status as the Other. Africa’s ostensibly authentic landscape perpetually draws Western scrutiny yet evades full comprehension, constituting the latent object of colonial scopic drive. Marlow’s cross-period visual temptation, visual impulse and subsequent frustration conceal unconscious voyeurism, which validates the applicability of Lacan’s gaze theory to textual analysis of the novel.

As Marlow’s steamboat journeys into inland Africa, shifting surroundings reshape his perceptual framework. The voyage opens with visual emptiness and unknown voids, then transitions into dense, concrete scenic spectacles that recur the exploratory desires first triggered by shop-window maps. Marlow’s landscape descriptions carry layered psychological connotations: African forests are metaphorically framed as confining architectural forms such as “like the closed door of a prison” (P56), alongside visual obstructions including “curtain” (P66) and “mask” (P56). This visual projection continues Marlow’s early vague impressions of the African coast, transforming the original visual blankness into tangible presence. The African continent is reduced to a “backdrop”, like a curtain hiding the truth. It appears in the form of an “trompe l’oeil” using visual barriers to disguise appearance and conceal essence. Marlow’s narration constructs a reverse visual logic: Africa’s scenes are shaped into artificial visual obstacles, deliberately thwarting European colonizers’ pry, solidifying the Western stereotypes of Africa, and refusing to be deconstructed.

Therefore, Marlow’s visual obsession transcends individual curiosity and materializes as a tangible manifestation of colonial ideology. As Achebe criticizes, “Conrad’s depiction of Africa and native Africans is distorted through Western lenses and falsifies the continent’s authentic identity”^[3] (Achebe, 1997:268). Fundamentally, Marlow’s visual obsession instantiates stereotypical shape and disciplinary power imposed by colonial hegemony upon African Otherness.

4. Disintegration of Visual Phenomena: Postcolonial Deconstruction of Marlow’s Visual Relations to Africa

From the analysis of Marlow’s gaze on Africa and the colonial stereotypes in it, visual phenomena emerge under the gaze mechanism. Rooted in the visual relationship between Marlow (narrative subject) and Africa (object), they form a visual framework, which postcolonial theory can

deconstruct. Jacques Derrida elaborates decentralization, critiquing logo-centrism in Western philosophy and aiming to dismantle centralism^[8]. The visual narration in *Heart of Darkness* shows decentralization, subverting Euro-centric colonial vision.

The recurrence of “devil” in the text reveals European colonial oppression in Africa. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994:8) argues: “By the late nineteenth century no corner of European life escaped the imperial fact; European economies craved overseas markets, raw materials, cheap labour and lucrative land, while state defence and diplomatic apparatuses strove incessantly to secure vast distant territories and subjugated populations”^[9], Marlow’s visual perspective sometimes transcends Euro-centrism, enabling visual decentralization. Conrad portrays Africa through Marlow’s lens, but Marlow’s perception is affected by the “blind spot of the psyche” as described by Lacan. When a subject’s subjectivity is undermined by the Other’s gaze, it becomes a blind spot. Marlow’s encounter with an old woman at the company offices triggers his experience of visual blind spot perception, a concept categorized by Sigmund Freud (1975:240) alongside fears of the evil eye. This visual decentralization is the latent assumption that “another’s gaze harbours harmful intent capable of tangible damaging power”^[10]

His gaze represents the Lacanian gaze from the Other, but it has a blind spot as it fails to question colonial evils.

The Belgian doctor’s observational gaze on Marlow is a second moment of visual “decentralization”. The doctor treats Marlow as a specimen, subverting Euro-centric norms. Marlow initially dismisses the doctor’s inquiries, but the resurfacing of the memory shows his inner unease. After facing resistance from African carriers, Marlow’s colonial authority collapses. He temporarily sees himself as an object but uses self - irony to maintain his colonial subjectivity.

Therefore, Africa is constructed as a focal point of the colonial gaze, exposing European precariousness in colonized areas. Marlow’s “seeing and being seen” dynamics show colonizers’ uncertainty about their gaze power and colonial stability.

5. Peering and Being Peered: The Interweaving of Visual Projection and Colonial Voyeurism

Despite the previous decentralized deconstruction of Marlow’s visual relation with Africa and the African Other’s contextual framework, the novel’s gaze-driven narration features a stark imbalance: African landscapes gain anthropomorphic traits via colonial visual projection, whereas African natives are disproportionately dehumanized. As Achebe (1997:253) points out: “Though Marlow occasionally singles out individual natives or native groups through stereotyped and self-serving colonial lenses, the authentic eyes of real Africans are mostly replaced in his psyche by the imagined gaze of untamed wilderness. Landscape turns human, and humans dissolve into landscape”^[3].

Such visual distortion originates from colonial visual projection, prominently reflected during Marlow’s river journey into inland Africa. From a Lacanian perspective, Marlow’s scotomization or psychic blind spot constitutes outward-bound scopic drive consciously restrained by the subject. In Lacan psychoanalysis, “scotomization functions as a psychological defense mechanism whereby the ego denies unwanted realities to evade painful emotions and traumatic memories”^[11]. Driven by this defensive impulse, Marlow severs his visual connection with the Other through deliberate visual blindness and denial. Meanwhile, the uncanny dread triggered by Africa’s inverted gaze subverts the original visual hierarchy: Marlow, the colonial subject, shifts into a passive object under being seen, completing the role reversal between the voyeur and the viewed.

Accordingly, it is necessary to examine voyeuristic motivations to dissect colonial voyeurism and the interplay between Marlow’s visual projection and such colonial voyeurism, alongside how Marlow negotiates his ties with Africa via visual projection. This approach unlocks in-depth

postcolonial interpretations behind the gaze in this novel.

Marlow's narration manifests three defined symptoms of colonial voyeurism. First, he presumes all visually obscured scenery conceals forbidden, exotic secrets. For him, leafy curtains and tree barriers are no ordinary natural scenery but veils hiding alien mysteries, echoing the previous "trompe-l'oeil" logic: Africa is narratively constructed to confound fixed European preconceptions and shroud itself in perpetual enigma.

Second, Marlow takes for granted the viewer's inherent right to pierce visual barriers and strip away the Other's veil. As Malek Alloula (1986:5) argues in *The Colonial Harem*, "Colonizers arbitrarily claim excessive visual privileges"^[12], a viewpoint consistent with Marlow's perceptual bias. Hampered by psychic blind spots or scotomization, Marlow develops visual aversion that erases Africa's authentic indigenous features and locks the continent into an inscrutable Other predicated on contrived mystification rooted in visual deprivation. Only after the steamboat ambush, when he catches a glimpse of Kurtz's tribe, does he feel freed from perceptual confinement, remarking that it was "as though a veil had been removed from my eyes" (P46), briefly seizing a visual control over the African Other.

Third, Marlow's voyeuristic impulse culminates in perceptual relief and the reclamation of visual sovereignty. Two recurring modes of visual projection further evidence his colonial voyeurism. The first mode is to frame Africa's riverine terrain as primeval prehistoric wilderness. Marlow describes his upstream voyage: "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest." (P51). This mindset derives from nineteenth-century social Darwinism, which categorized Africans as "contemporary savages"^①. Hence the novel depicts Africa as prehistoric terrain and its river-dwelling tribes as primordial humans. Marlow temporally relegates African to a timeless primordial past: "I don't think a single one of them had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time—had no inherited experience to teach them as it were" (P42).

The second projecting mode centers on an unnamed African woman, whose appearance is framed under "A formidable silence hung over the scene" (P61) with Marlow deliberately highlighting conspicuous "acoustic absence". Depicted as a silent visual icon, she fascinates Marlow who records her attire, ornaments and gestures for exclusive visual consumption. Under the entanglement of visual projection and colonial voyeurism, the colonized are stripped of discourse and deprived of their right to articulate themselves within the hierarchical colonial power structure.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper uses Lacan's Gaze Theory to interpret Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* from a postcolonial perspective. The study shows that the gazing narratives about Africa in the novel are projections of colonial power and ideology. By examining Marlow's visual obsession, the gaze on African landscapes, and his interactions with indigenous Africans, the paper exposes how colonial discourse constructs the African Other and exercises power, and critiques colonial narration. Visually, Marlow's fixation reflects colonizers' desires to explore and conquer Africa. His projections on African space and rivers show typical colonial scopic drive, revealing colonialism's intrusive essence.

^① Note: As Patrick Brantlinger observes, "Evolutionary thought appears almost deliberately contrived to legitimize imperialism. The evolutionary schema staging human advancement through successive stages from savagery via barbarism to civilization fosters a self-congratulatory brand of anthropology that powerfully entrenches the belief in Africans' inherent inferiority, even their quasi-bestial nature." (*Victorian Fiction*, p.203).

Meanwhile, an analysis based on Lacanian Gaze Theory reveals deconstruction and subversion against colonial gaze in the novel. The reversed gazes from the elderly woman and the doctor make Marlow uneasy, causing visual decentralization and exposing the colonizer's anxiety. In Africa, Marlow changes from an active voyeur to a passive object, which shows colonial oppression and the fragility of colonial power. His confusion and unease reflect self-doubt about his colonial identity and introspection against colonial discourse.

Therefore, this paper aims to go beyond general postcolonial readings of *Heart of Darkness*. By introducing gaze theory, it offers new analytical perspectives for postcolonial criticism, focuses on the relationship between visual narration and subjectivity, and helps interpret the novel's postcolonial themes more deeply.

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