Research Article

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# Colonial Mimicry, Modernist Experimentation, and the Hegelian Dialectics of Empire: A Postcolonial Deconstructive Reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2025-0062
received April 28, 2025; accepted July 8, 2025

**Abstract:** The present study offers an analytical nucleus of Joseph Conrad's polemical novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) that weaves and interweaves between Victorianism and Modernism, capturing the zeitgeist of its time. This is particularly punctuated through the way the novella's characters epitomize Victorian notions of the collective consciousness of British imperialism, along with Conrad's transcendental experimental style that emblematizes the rudiments of his modern narrative technique. Within this rationale, this study aims to elucidate the credibility of appropriating an interdisciplinary eclectic set of modernist-iconoclastic readings, by utilizing a postcolonial appropriation, as in Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry. More importantly, this study will propose an exploratory explication of colonial mimicry, along with its significant conceptual staples of postcolonialism; slippage, Trompe l'oeil, and the dialectical inclusionism/exclusionism, parsed with Hegel's accentuation of master/slave dialectic. In consequence, the overarching goal of this study recapitulates that the novella is veritably timelier than ever, as its spectrum analysis still warrants a bevy of deconstructive re-readings of supremacist ideologies and colonialist/imperialist dimensions within contemporaneous contexts.

**Keywords:** *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad, colonial mimicry, modernism, Homi K. Bhabha, postcolonial deconstruction

## 1 Introduction

> "And what if one of the gods does wreck me out on the wine-dark sea? I have a heart that is injured to suffering and I shall steel it to endure that too. For in my day I have had many bitter and painful experiences in war and on the stormy seas. So let this new disaster come. It only makes one more." (Homer. *The Odyssey*, p. 157)

In Western thought, travel logs are as old as humanity, and the empirical tradition of its master-narrative has already been adroitly subsisted in Western and Eastern vernacular; the former delineated in Herodotus' travel logs and the latter in Ibn Battuta's. More essentially, the threshold of any work of travel is instigated by the sea, and its extensive framework hinges on wars that have provided a potent incentive to an oblique subtext of colonialism and imperialism. On this premise, the quotation above is an example of travel logs, where Odysseus narrates his "painful" experiences interwoven with journeying into the dark sea and partaking in the war between the Trojans (the East) and the Greeks (the West), which sequentially undergirds Greece's imperialistic invasion of Troy. Traditionally, in looking at the symbiosis of the sea and colonialism in the

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literary history of travel logs, one tends to unearth – to incorporate Friedrich Hegel – the collective consciousness[1] of a certain nation or society. Veritably, it is the sociocultural apparatus and state religion that authorized and sanctioned an impetuous to wars and imperialistic invasions, and this can be evinced well through the exemplar of Sir Walter Scott whose *Tales of the Crusaders* (1825) retrospectively reinterprets historical events of religious wars ordained by the church during the medieval ages, as an attempt to concomitantly mirror the contemporaneous status quos and collective consciousness of nineteenth century Great Britain.

This question, that of travel logs in particular, concerns the impression left by a conglomeration of English writers whose consensus on narrating a gratuitous colonialism becomes a simulacrum of the British entrepreneurial colonial project within the narrative form and structure of the English novel. Daniel Defoe's (1719) *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) in the eighteenth century is a vanguard in colonial and imperialistic justification, where a communicative texture of master/slave dialectic is brushed off as a travel narrative. As the nineteenth century progressed, the colony was tangentially mentioned in order to treat the atrocity of the African slave traffic as a subsidiary point, and sharpen the focus only on the materialistic upshot of the trade. Travel logs continue to propagate their beams in contemporary times, a working example is *Travels with Herodotus*.[2]

In the long history of the English novel and its legacy, the sea mirrors a world of mysteries, tales and a world of travelling abroad; it is a world of meeting foreigners, and for Britain, the "Other[3]," which brings to the fore the premised novel of this study; the ingenious anticolonial novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by the Polish writer Joseph Conrad (1899). Upon its publication, burgeoning scholarship has considered the novel as a travel log, as the sea becomes a nucleus of its narrative textures, and the theme of the journey as its leitmotif. More importantly, Conrad was cognizant of the tacit interconnectedness of the sea and colonialism, as he chose the sea to be an endogenous to British colonialism. Conrad's text thus provides us with a characteristically contrapuntal statement that, albeit the sociopolitical atmosphere is in a state of flux, the microstructure of imperialism, nonetheless, would incessantly cease to exist. Through this initial hypothesis, the study provides an empirical analysis of dialogical anti-colonialism that highlights the concomitant interrelationship of contextualizing a post-colonial delineation of mimicry. More essentially, the contribution of this article lies in the fact that although the postcolonial field has already highlighted the lambasting and polemical dialogue directed towards imperialistic expansionism in this novel, it nonetheless extends its contribution to contextualize Conrad's vituperation within the symbiosis encompassing Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry to analyze how the colonial "Self" and colonized "Other" strive for survival within the political socio-economic apparatus of the empire. More importantly, this conflation, which when studied contrapuntally, theoretically contextualizes Hegel's (1807) master/slave dialectic, meticulously substantiates interdisciplinary interpretations.

Along the same lines, this text is *ipso facto* anti-colonial; it is a novel which can be set apart and aside from other travel logs. Conrad attempts to humanize Africans and expose the viciousness of imperialism by criticizing the civilizing mission, which is the heart of the empire's darkness, as Bhabha infers, "For the epic intention of the civilizing mission, 'human and not wholly human' in the famous words of Lord Rosebery" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 122). His countercultural stance against the cultural myopia and the hierarchical cultural atmosphere of Great Britain grows into a timeless illustration of committed consciousness. The rudiments of these polemical salient features not only engage in a future-oriented reminiscence of Conrad's Polish national

**1** Collective consciousness is referred to by Hegel as Spirit, which causes an individual existing in a certain period and place to approach their world through a communal interpretation instigated by others around them, where he avers that "one approaches the world through a common mind." (Kleinman 2013, 84) Hegel enunciates that the nature of collective consciousness is not perpetually stable, but an evolving phenomena that changes through a set of society's values, customs, norms, laws, morals and beliefs, in accordance with the current historical and cultural moment.

**2** Travels with Herodotus. is a non-fictional appropriation of Herodotus' Histories by the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński (2004), that brings within its compass the writer's experiences along with an array of philosophical exemplifications enunciated in Herodotus' book. Consonantly, Kapuściński's work serves as a pivotal context to conflictual events waged amidst contemporary times between the East and the West, and initiates a debate to whether certain European practices and customs have originated from Africa.

**3** Within the postcolonial scholarship on the colonized and colonizer, when the treatment of the dichotomous relationship between the Self and the Other is discussed, scholars like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha generally capitalize both entities.

consciousness[4] and political praxis to modern conditions of colonialism, but also with the practical attempt to elucidate and apply his liberational connotations as a catalyst for change within Western consciousness. H.S. Zins postulates:

> Conrad made English literature more mature and reflective because he called attention to the sheer horror of political realities overlooked by English citizens and politicians. The case of Poland, his oppressed homeland, was one such issue. The colonial exploitation of Africans was another. His condemnation of imperialism and colonialism, combined with sympathy for its persecuted and suffering victims, was drawn from his Polish background, his own personal sufferings, and the experience of a persecuted people living under foreign occupation. Personal memories created in him a great sensitivity for human degradation and a sense of moral responsibility. (Zins, 1998, p. 33)

Nonetheless, inasmuch as *Heart of Darkness* counteracts colonialism, the confusion surrounding the elusive narration pertaining to the colonies has substantiated criticism, for the way Conrad presents the events is equivocal and controversial to some readers. While *Heart of Darkness* is deliberately yielded to the darkness of the empire, a consensus of readership has emerged to denote the inconspicuous illustration as a representation of Africa, leaden with a bevy of negative connotations. A case in point is the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who vehemently expresses this idea in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'," which triggered contentious arguments. Achebe accentuates that "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe, 2016, p. 1789) and that *Heart of Darkness* should not be regarded as a canonical work on the grounds that it is "a novel which celebrates. dehumanisation of Africa and Africans" (Achebe, 2016, p. 1790).

In contrast, Said (1983) applies a contrapuntal reading to *Heart of Darkness* in "Joseph Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative" printed in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* to respond to Achebe by way of explicating Conrad's designation of double-discourse; of overtly denouncing colonialism and covertly mirroring the collective consciousness of Western imperialism:

> Conrad whose original Polish circumstances of delivery he describes below, emphasises the self-conscious contextuality of so many of Conrad's tales: the fact that they are generally very carefully dramatised, in one way or another, as being told in a certain place and time and to a certain audience, giving rise to a double-frame in which the ostensible 'story' is persistently juxtaposed with questions of the circumstances of its consumption and experience. (Said, 1983, p. 77)

According to Achebe, there were tabulations of racism, but as Said suggests, applying a contrapuntal reading to the novel would allow the reader to epistemologically reach the pinnacle of understanding that Conrad is merely trying to expose the false intentions of civilization by reading the novel from the context of propaganda. To exemplify: "Context is one of the most important elements that achieve coherence in the text. It plays a crucial role in guiding the recipient to the correct interpretation of the text" (Al-Thunebat et al., 2024, p. 237). This idea is especially relevant when analyzing *Heart of Darkness*, where Conrad is not merely presenting a colonial narrative, but rather exposing the false intentions of civilization when the novel is read through the context of imperial propaganda. Furthermore, as an individual who experienced displacement, Conrad's Polish origins become an allegorical layer of nationalism, which – when considered in context – reshapes the meaning of the novella as a critique rather than a glorification of empire. On the surface, the novella might come across as a work that treads on the common grounds of monolithic British sociocultural and racial discrimination against Africa; nonetheless, it also departs from there when contrapuntally analyzing it. For this reason, some readers divert from this premised reading and fall into a row of questions: why Conrad's countervailing of imperialistic discourse was not more overtly implemented within the narrative textures of the novel? Might it be an attempt to transcendentally deviate from the Victorian context, through experimenting with a narrative more congruent with the modern era?

**4** The geopolitical location of Poland has instigated colonial rivalry between expansionist countries like Imperial Russia and Germany (kingdom of Prussia) who fought in Poland to gain control of its lands, which commenced imperial domination through mining and manufacturing on an incremental scale. Nonetheless, continual resistance for Polish independence throughout the nineteenth century inevitably facilitated its independence in 1918.

As a result of needing to achieve the hypothesis of this study, an axis of theoretical frameworks is explicated to elucidate the credibility of appropriating modernist approaches by utilizing a postcolonial reading; Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry. More importantly, this study will also propose an exploration of colonial and imperialistic mimicry, which will be furthered by what it brings within its compass, mainly staples of post-colonialism, as in the concept of slippage, Trompe l'oeil and inclusion and exclusion. Consequently, the overarching goal of this study recapitulates that the novella is veritably timelier than ever, as its spectrum encapsulates the fulcrum of deconstructive analysis of supremacist ideology and hegemonic power

## 2 Homi Bhabha's Theory of Mimicry

> "The effect of mimicry is camouflage ..... - exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare." (Jacques Lacan. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* p. 99)

Within certain streams of philosophic and scientific vernacular, the concept of mimicry militates in the fulcrum of an array of thinkers; Aristotle experimented with the concept of mimicry[5] and Darwin extoled the work of the scientist Henry W. Bates who contributed to Darwinism by corroborating that mimicry was an excellent phenomenal example of adaption through natural selection (Evans, 1965, p.211). Hence, mimicry was incepted in evolutionary biology and was appropriated in postcolonialism by Homi Bhabha, whose spectrum analysis of colonial ambivalence is predominantly grounded upon the Lacanian conceptualization of mimicry as camouflage. By reconstructing biological mimicry to a postcolonial theory, mimicry unveils the semblance of colonizing missions that effectuates a mimetic representation as a form of adaptation for the colonized Other, and a mode of survival, which "emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 85).

It can be thence concluded that the performativity of the colonized Other is a malleable bulwark for mimicry within the benchmark of post-colonialism, and it is on this basis that the study chooses the spectrum analysis of Bhabha's (2004) theoretical approach of mimicry as discussed in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" in *Location of Culture* as its groundwork. The extensive multidimensional ideas in Bhabha's chapter on mimicry merit versatile interpretations, which in tandem can be effectively manifested within the layers of the novella. In this premise, he defines mimicry as "The desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite." (Bhabha, 2004, p. 176). Articulating a methodological approach to post-colonialism, Bhabha utilizes "*trompe-l'œil,"* slippage, inclusion, and exclusion to develop his concept of colonial mimicry through an interdisciplinary amalgamation of theory and applied criticism by a multitude of thinkers.

Bhabha does not explicitly construct a detailed explication of the notion of trompe-l'œil. However, at its core, the term signifies "optical illusion" and, according to Bhabha, serves as the underlying logic that sustains mimicry. It is simultaneously maintained as a colonial discursive gaze incorporated to subjugate the colonized, in provision for illuminating the strictures of representability that the colonizer demands of the colonized. Because the colonized subject appears to meticulously mimic the colonizer through colonial representation while simultaneously failing to achieve an equilibrium of power, their mimicry nonetheless converges upon an antinomy. The coercive representation that the colonized must produce, alongside a native representation that signifies difference, becomes a process for their denial of colonial subjugation. As Bhabha (2004) asserts, "The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal"

**5** Aristotle's provides a two fold enunciation of mimeses in poetry and biology; the former yields through a development from a basic human delight in mimicry. Accordingly, human beings acquire knowledge through imitating and they receive pleasure when identifying the imitations of the perceived universe around them. The latter is explicated in *The History of Animals Books IV-VI* where he corroborates: "as a general rule all birds with crooked talons are ...disposed to mimicry" (Aristotle, 1970, p. 323).

(p. 179). This inherent contradiction aligns with Treefzer's (2018) clarification that trompe-l'œil is a technique in which "something seems [to be] what is not" (p. 70), reinforcing the illusory nature of mimicry in colonial discourse.

This article foregrounds an extended reading of the postcolonial trompe-l'œil, a concept that remains considerably elusive within postcolonial discourse. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, this study offers an extended conceptual analysis by contextualizing trompe-l'œil within its artistic movement. Correspondingly, it engages with Baudrillard's (1989) theorization of trompe-l'œil, which bears a striking resemblance to Bhabha's postcolonial appropriation of the term. While mimicry compels the colonized to represent rather than reflect, trompe-l'œil in art functions as an anti-representational device. Baudrillard empirically defines it as "an anticeremonial and antirepresentation, whether social, religious, or artistic" (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 56). In the postcolonial context, trompe-l'œil produces a discrepancy: what appears to the colonizer as representation simultaneously functions as counter-representation for the colonized and the anticolonial subject. Mimicry, more essentially, "is the act of the colonized subject imitating the colonizer through a myriad of ways implemented through language, culture and religion," which is "[…]constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 87). This brings to prominence the ambivalence of slippage, which is parsed as the ineluctable part of mimicry that subsumes a double articulation of strategic disciplinary and a source of empowerment for the colonized concurrently. To echo Bhabha, "Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 92). Therefrom, it does give the colonized a sense of power, and undermines the colonizer in a way; the colonizer's disciplinary stratagem of slippage is not fully converting the colonized; in other words, they are not making the colonized subjects like them.

Moreover, it is the anchor to distinguishing the colonized from the colonizer where the colonial self makes sure that slippage is always in process in order to continue colonizing the other as a reassurance that the colonizer will not be overthrown, "mimicry requires this slippage to function and make the colonizers feel in control. Ultimately through it also gives power to the colonized," as long as the colonized "is mimicking repetitively rather than representing" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 162). Furthermore, while trompe-l'æil endorses "representing" as the by-product of mimicry, slippage acquiesces in the colonized to repeat, "mimicry repeats rather than re-presents" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 175). Two apt examples of slippage can include J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), the adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe,* when Friday wears his master's robes, but there is slippage implemented in the African dance that he continues to perform while wearing those robes. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the white civilizing mission arrives and anglicizes the Igbo people; the Igbo people, henceforth, mimics the colonizer by practicing Christianity, but they achieve slippage through their polytheistic religion, which is part of their Igbo culture. For the colonizer, it would appear to them that their pyrrhic victory is achieved, as the colonized are subjugated wholly through religion, but they will fail to notice that the colonized are holding on to their Igbo culture.

Having these two postcolonial staples in mind, the colonized natives must keep their true part of themselves concealed in order to determine the possibility of survival. If we presume, along with Bill Ashcroft, that mimicry is "When colonial discourse encourages the colonial subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a blurred copy of the colonizer that can be quiet threatening" (Ashcroft, 2002, p. 64). The colonized, thus, is expected to become a quasi-replica of the colonizer by acting out the dictum of whiteness rehearsed by the colonizer. Therefore, as Bhabha (2004) asserts, "mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (p. 99). The act of performing whiteness ostensibly ensures the colonized Other's inclusion and, by extension, their survival. Conversely, the failure or refusal to mimic leads to exclusion, thereby foregrounding Bhabha's inclusion/exclusion dialectic.

Bhabha's concept of mimicry is a strategic colonial power that has a desired goal of approval for the natives in terms of a twofold principle: inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion aims at the acceptance of good natives for mimicking the role the colonizer prescribes through a dominant system of limited representation of colonial directives dictated by the empire. The latter principle, in turn, is analogous to the punitive retribution in gender performativity, which aims at denouncing the majority of the colonized as bad natives

for their abortive mimicry. The colonizer's jettisons of the blemish colonized are due to their divergence from mimicry, for once the realization dawns upon the natives, they start to mutinously resist against the domination of imperial and colonial powers. Consensus postcolonial scholars would generally conjecture an improbability of a rapprochement between the colonizer and colonized, which in return, "raises affective and ethical issues connected with cultural differences and social discrimination" thusly, Bhabha enlists them as they are; "the problems of inclusion and exclusion, dignity and humiliation, respect and repudiation" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 17).

These problems, specifically the problem of inclusion and exclusion, collapse to construct a struggle between the colonial master and the colonized slave. Within this rationale, this study offers a contextualization of the two principles that interpenetrate to appositely contextualize Hegel et al.'s master/slave dialectic as they become a malleable bulwark for a dialectical self/other dichotomy. Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic, which is corroborated in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) as Lordship-Bondage, hypothesizes on the confrontation between two independent subjects' "self-consciousnesses" who will potentially engage in a fight of life-and-death struggle. This bilateral force is self-destructive as the two self-consciousnesses must struggle because each one sees the other as a threat to itself. Until the incendiary confrontation arises, each self-consciousness is a master; this fight will render one a master and another a slave. The subject's consciousness of its power over another is made possible by the slave's submission in exchange for the slave's life after this life and death struggle:

> Self.,.consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself~ for it finds itself as an other being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (Hegel et al., 1977, p. 147)

According to Hegel, the slave was always destined to be subjugated, given that Hegel is hypostatizing an image of the development of the scepter of subjectivity from an axis of power. Although this enslavement is apodictic for the master's victory, it is not valorized yet, for the fact that the master's dominance necessitates recognition by another equal to himself, insomuch as the slave is inferior and will not be able to grant his master such recognition. As the argument is intended to make out, within a Hegelian master/slave context, the exigencies of the colonial master's subjectivity is for an equal to acknowledge his superiority, and such an acknowledgement is vitalized through the enslavement of the colonized Other: "But according to the Notion of recognition this is possible only when each is for the other what the other is for it, only when each in its own self through its own action, and again through the action of the other, achieves this pure abstraction of being-for-self" (Hegel et al., 1977, p. 149).

Moreover, Hegel's premise concerns another underlying principle where an unequal relationship between the master and slave instigates another form of exploitation. This convulsive exploitation is ensued by Hegel, wherein the slave in his liminal state of consciousness, through his subjugation, works on the things, the profits and benefits of which are then obtained domineeringly by the master. The things, accordingly, signify the modes of production, and this relationship is based, in fact, on one where the slave does the labor yet owns none of the products, whilst the master, on the other hand, does none of the labor but owns the products. This enunciation – on the basis of which an entire explication about mimicry is being postulated through Bhabha's principle of inclusion and exclusion – redraws a Marxist interpretation of modes of production as a politics of exploitation. In sum, this idea finds its correlate in *Heart of Darkness*, where the reader can scrupulously notice that Conrad employs a pleonasm of leitmotifs to discover and unearth the tragic paradoxes where exploration becomes exploitative. At the outset, the civilizing mission that arrives in the Congo becomes an exploitative mission to scramble for ivory.

All things considered, the novel has been deemed a critique of capitalism and the miscellaneous issues pertaining to it, like racism and ethnic cleansing. Appropriately, the company that recruits Kurtz and later on Marlow mirrors the macroeconomic level of England as an autopoietic capitalist system. Capitalism figures as an endogenous system of macro and microeconomics within the sociopolitical fabric of the empire. Lenin (2011) expounds on Britain's gratuitous imperialism and highlights how Britain, along with Japan and America, is capitalist country who have evolved through colonialism. He punctuates in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*:

> Capitalism has grown into a world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the population of the world by a handful of "advanced" countries. And this "booty" is shared between two or three powerful world plunderers armed to the teeth (America, Great Britain, Japan), who are drawing the whole world into their war over the division of their booty. (Lenin, 2011, p. 14)

Furthermore, when contextualizing the theory of mimicry, one tends to find that the novel grapples with the ideologies bestowed by the white civilizing mission that indoctrinates peremptory acts of acculturation for the colonized other to mimic, as Franz Fanon accentuates, "For the black man there is only one destiny, and it is white" (Fanon et al., 2005, p. 43). To mimic the white man became the ultimate destiny for the colonized Other, they need to accept and wear the white mask for their black skin, "If I may adapt Samuel Weber's formulation of the marginalizing vision of castration, then colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 122). While the colonizer ordained colonial mimicry as a mechanism of reformation for the Other, they do so for the purpose of not allowing them an equiprimordial existence, so that the colonial Self will cease to be superior in consciousness.

## 3 The Colonized "Other" Mimics the Colonial Self

> "We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the new world, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new." (V. S. Naipaul. *The Mimic Men*, p. 12)

> "The idea of mastery over nature often contains, I fear, another element – the will to power as such, the will to dominate. And to the idea of domination I cannot take kindly. It is blasphemy, sacrilege, hubris. Men are not gods and they ought to know it. We shall never dominate nature." (Karl Popper. *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality,* 66)

Popper's quotation can be espoused as a lambasting critique towards the English colonial subject who sought to conquer and dominate nature as a Godly given propriety for the culmination of his empire and his own good. While "mimic men" by Naipaul (2001) parallels Bhabha's discussion of the mimetic colonized Other that will be analyzed in this section. Conrad's deconstructionism of native primitivism juxtaposes the popularized critical misrepresentation espoused by him of the Other, which does not reflect an authentic interpretation of the novella. In a letter he wrote to William Blackwood in 1898, Conrad expressed that he would be supplying him with a significant contribution, but was uncertain whether the novel was suitable for contemporaneous readership (Waddington, 1985). In this instance, his panegyric does not mean that he was doubtful about the eventual quality of his workmanship, but rather if the premised argument within the narrative texture of his story appeared potentially worrying, on the grounds that it was furnished with "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa" (Waddington, 1985, Letters 164). Conrad attempts to demystify, through the hierarchical guild patterns of power, the colonial modes of relationships between the European and non-European individuals amidst the atrocious depiction of colonial enterprise. He has been perspicacious enough to offer a minutiae of colonial behavior, which in return unveiled that the civilizing mission is a pretext to murdering and exploiting the indigenous other.

Within this cognitive reasoning, this section analyzes Conrad's representation of the Other as the orienting principle to highlight their mimicry of the colonizer as a means of survival. *Heart of Darkness* is grounded with plenteous corroborative details of political colonial aggression; the colonizers adopted certain methods in dominating and colonizing the natives, where everything they owned was sequestered by them, and they ruled over it. Consequently, the colonized were displaced by the colonizers physically and mentally, and were expected to imitate the colonizer but within a decentralized edifice. Since certain European colonizers have had a sense of hegemony of their own civilization, they secured a fulcrum of distinctiveness with the colonized natives, by molding them into feeling inferior, barbaric, and illiterate. This brings to the fore the British role in changing education, which ensues from a long line of historical thinking. prognosticated by a coterie of thinkers who factually dichotomized human beings into master/slave; Aristotle is a paragon of this instancing where he peremptory defends a praxis of natural slavery in Part V of *Politics*: "For that some should rule and

others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule [...]" (Aristotle & Jowett, 2000, p. 8). As such, his supremacist demonstration stands as a hermeneutical jargon of historical thinking that prompts a polarizing episteme between a Western and foreign subject.

The concept of colonial mimicry in *Heart of Darkness* illustrates how the colonized subject is both shaped by and resistant to imperialist discourse. While Structuralist readings may treat the novel as a linguistic artifact, Poststructuralist approaches situate it within its historical and ideological context, revealing the contradictions of empire. This aligns with the argument that "while Structuralists have encouraged the reader to methodologically approach a cultural text as a source of language, Poststructuralism meticulously puts the text within the historical context in order to unpack from it a wealth of historical insight" (Amireh, 2022, p. 554). By exposing the tensions in colonial mimicry, Conrad's novel becomes not just a narrative about empire but also a site of resistance, where language and identity are in constant negotiation. Language and culture have been incontrovertibly the major tools of colonization, where the colonizer performs his colonial role through language by sedulously exercising colonial coercion through the enforcement of the English language in the colonies. In fact, this made the natives mutely dumb, for it became veritably excruciating for them to communicate and express themselves or raise their voice against any form of exploitation. In further illustration of this matter, Ngugi wa Thiong'o infers in *Decolonising the Mind* that it is a symbolic paradigm of spiritual and mental subjugation, where he posits that, "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugator. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (Thiong'o, 2011, p. 29). This can be illustrated when one of the few times we hear a native, the manager's boy, speak by declaring that "Mistah Kurtz – he dead" (Conrad, 2019, p. 62). As a proven conclusion, Thiong'o's accentuation complements the mimetic aspect of slippage, where Bhabha demonstrates that mimicry "causes a subversive slippage of identity and authority" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 91), which can occur simultaneously.

Concomitantly, while slippage of identity is illustrated through the manager's boy's report in broken English, a subversion of power inoculated through slippage of authority is vitalized through his report of the death of the most crucial character in the novel. It would appear for the colonizer that the broken English of the manager's boy is a slippage from his own identity; as he no longer speaks his native language, thus succeeding in making him mimic the colonizer but still be inferior in their language, which posits an obstruction to convey this fatally pernicious matter in a proper way. Nonetheless, the colonizer does not realize that the colonized Other has been placed in a powerful position by announcing the death of the most powerful person in the colony[6]. Bhabha sets out to capture this matter, averring that "Mimicry requires this slippage to function and make the colonizers feel in control. Ultimately, though, it also gives power to the colonized" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 124). Drawing on Bhabha's tackling of the inclusion/exclusion strategy, *Heart of Darkness* adumbrates a contrapuntal reading of both principles to unveil pockets of resistance, wherein, at first glance, the reader comes across a scene in the novel where skulls are accumulated in Kurtz's hut. Marlow provides an elaborate depiction of those skulls:

> They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise... I returned deliberately to the first I had seen—and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber. (Conrad, 2019, pp. 137–138)

This thought-provoking imagery propounds the reader to solicit an explication pertaining to the raison *d'etre* for Kurtz's villainy in murdering all those natives. Although Conrad does not convey this idea cogently, it is nevertheless conspicuous enough to circumstantiate that those natives were killed because they did not mimic

**6** In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1969) demonstrates that the channels of knowledge are controlled by people in power, creating a supremacist ideological discourse. The manager's boy, in this instance, has controlled the channels of power by utilizing the colonizer's language to deliver the death of one of them.

their role properly. The colonized natives were expected by the colonizer to infinitely mimic a role, and for this reason, an unexpected volatizing animus behavior on the colonized's part can be improbable. Resultantly, because of their superiority in consciousness, the colonizer will never anticipate that 1 day, the colonized might slip through the cracks and venture on an uprising coup d'état, which in return, would eventually lead them to the route of exclusionism, catalyzing their punishment. In a reciprocal manner, Aphra Behn's (1688) *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave,* is an example where the colonized Oroonoko stops mimicking his expected role, and is punished for revolting against the imperial powers by being dismembered and murdered brutally.

Correspondingly, it is worth pinpointing how Kurtz's villainy – through the imagery of heads impaled on stakes – establishes the Hegelian notion of the master's recognition from an equal. It can be argued that Kurtz, as the master, requires recognition not only from the Africans he subjugates but also from his equals, since the natives occupy an inferior position, making it insufficient for Kurtz to validate his status on his own. Hegel thereby encapsulates that "Action by one-side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both" (Hegel et al., 1977, p. 112). In this context, Marlow thereby cognizes the symbolism behind such a transgressive act: "These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing – food for thought [...]" (Conrad, 2019, p. 139). Indeed, it is food for thought to ponder upon Kurtz's act. Kurtz's actions warrant consideration, given that he successfully establishes himself as a formidable conqueror, thereby securing recognition from his equals. Similarly, the Russian trader expresses his bewilderment at Kurtz's morally reprehensible deeds, stating, 'Oh, he is bad, very bad'" (ibid).

This explication of inclusionism/exclusionism can also be integrated within the intersection of the analytical appropriation of Hegel's master/slave dialectic pertaining to the modes of production. To begin with, the chief accountant portrays Kurtz as the ideal exemplar for the Company, by illustrating that Kurtz's modes of production are lucrative, as he produces more ivory than any other trading post and will presumably become a distinctive figure in the Company:

> How did that ivory come all this way?' growled the elder man, who seemed very vexed. The other explained that it had come with a fleet of canoes in charge of an English half-caste clerk Kurtz had with him; ... which he started to do alone in a small dugout with four paddling savages, leaving the half-caste to continue down the river with the ivory. (Conrad, 2019, p. 72)

Although the "four paddling savages" are the ones who do all the labor in producing ivory, it is Kurtz who, laxly, does none of the work but, for his sense of subterfuge, takes credit and ownership for the modes of production of ivory. In making this point, while Kurtz exploits the natives for the modes of production, the Company-which symbolizes the empire, exploits Kurtz for these modes of production, thereupon claiming ownership and credit for his work. Kurtz reaches this epiphany of awareness by the end, averring: "This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do – resist? Eh? I want no more than justice.' [...]" (Conrad, 2019, p. 209).

Through this section's initial hypothesis, mimicking one's role warrants the colonized Other to safeguard their inclusion, thus ensuring their survival. To cite an example, Marlow – upon his arrival at the Inner station – comes across a number of native laborers who are mimicking their preordained role of slavery, where he finds them in dire conditions building the white man's railways. In an instance, he finds a master beating his slave constantly; "the beaten nigger groaned somewhere. "What a row the brute makes!" said the indefatigable man with the moustaches, appearing near us. "Serve him right. Transgression – punishment – bang! Pitiless, pitiless" (Conrad, 2019, p. 44). The slave is receiving punishment from his master, which denotes a probability of not wanting to mimic his expected enslaved role and thusly, is on the path to suffer exclusion. The master goes on to implement a dehumanizing rhetoric to justify this punishment as a necessity that might instigate a probability of his memetic exclusion; "That's the only way" (Conrad, 2019, p. 44). Hence, through the process of exclusionism, the colonized experience a momentary fear of death and consequently submit to their master by starting to cyclically mimic their inferior role. In this praxis, the asymmetrical relationship between the colonial master and the colonized other is understood through Hegel's accentuation on the master/slave dialectic: "These individuals who have felt the fear of death, of their absolute master, again submit to negation

and distinctions, arrange themselves in the various spheres, and return to an apportioned and limited task, but thereby to their substantial reality" (Hegel et al., 1977, p. 361). There is considerable evidence that indicates that this interpenetration of mimetic inclusion and exclusion undergirds the vivid contrast between the civilizing, conquering, building mission and the horrifying outrageous practice towards humanity. Conrad, hence, establishes the dichotomous self/other struggle to expostulate that the empire is built on the wrecks of other people. This aligns with the notion that "writing back to the empire serves as a form of resistance, reclaiming personal ownership by challenging hegemony and dismantling Orientalist tropes" (Allawzi et al., 2024, p. 2120). By exposing the exploitative foundations of imperialism, Conrad's narrative – while emerging from within the colonial framework – can be read as a critique that destabilizes hegemonic power structures, much like later postcolonial writers who directly challenge empire through their works.

The final interpretive approach is the predominant colonial mode of representation: trompe-l'æil. The emphasis in this study's analysis contextualizes the African woman, Kurtz's mistress, as the simulacrum of colonial and imperialistic exploitation, where her self-reflective objectivity of mythical fetishism is a conduit for the colonizer to acquire power. The African women create an illusion for the colonizer, as for them she mirrors back her own land, which in return is sought after through their colonial gaze. They establish their colonial agency by subjugating her to mimic the dominant system of representation through the representability of her body. Her self-projective, symbolic inferiorized representation signifies a collective obligation encumbered on the colonized to mirror back the image that the colonizer projects through mimicry, which produces neither difference nor identity. Maryna Romanets argues that: "Those images offered by a colonial culture as a national identity for the colonized are reflected in the "cracked looking-glass of a servant," " or rather a trompe-l'oeil mirror held by a metropolitan culture with a concocted picture of a 'national' (ethnic/folk/primitive) culture [...]" (Romanets, 1997, p. 12).

In this particular framework, the colonized is reconfigured for this sort of "partial presence," which is the basis of mimicry. Kurtz's mistress, accordingly, becomes "the subject of a mirror object" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 153) where what is supposedly a patriarchal/imperial mode of representation of colonized mimicry produces a reflection of the real intention of the colonial looker, where he loses himself in this illusory image. As Baudrillard remarks: "Simulacra without perspective, the figures in trompe l'oeil appear suddenly, with lustrous exactitude, as though denuded of the aura of meaning and bathed in ether. Pure appearances, they have the irony of too much reality" (ibid). Indeed, it is an irony how the African women's body becomes an all-round view of colonial domination and imperialistic expansionism.

Within the above established framework on trompe l'oeil, the African woman at the Inner Station, with her physical beauty and exotic appearance, mirrors the land that the colonizers aim to possess. Marlow describes her with a fetishized gaze, incarnating the colonizer's gaze that links her to the land she represents. In a sense, her body acutely "mirrors" the body of Africa, and since she is the only woman who is presented in the novel wearing jewelry, this particularly mirrors how the colonizers are robbing the land as they scramble for ivory:

> She walked with measured steps...with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high...she had... 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 must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. (Conrad, 2019, p. 188)

Conrad's structural use of the exotic imagery of the African woman seems to bespeak a repository of polemical ideas, which placed him on a collision course with some of his readership. Notwithstanding the fact that Conrad expostulates, through his vexation towards imperialism and colonialism and by following a counter-clockwise direction from the coterie of Victorian writers whose consensus on justifying imperialism was implemented in their works, he still falls into the ambit of gratuitous colonialism. Huggan enunciates that writers, "recognize that the value of their writing as an international commodity depends, to a large extent, on the exotic appeal it holds to an unfamiliar metropolitan audience. They thus risk becoming complicit with the cultural imperialism they denounce" (Huggan, 2005, p. 275). As this article has already achieved its premised anticolonial reading of the novel, one can assume a contradistinctive line of thought, which is that Conrad

might have instantiated this functional framework of exoticized representation to buttress his novel on a contrapuntal reading.

As readers, we are also arriving at the text with an ideological pre-determinism indoctrinated with a colonial mentality, and for this reason, the reader is supposed to decolonize a text and offer a contrapuntal reading, for a conventionally established opposition to the mimetic act of reading. To echo Bhabha, "a turning away from the vicissitudes of interpretation in the mimetic act of reading to the question of the effects of power the inscription of strategies of individuation and domination in those 'dividing practices' which construct the colonial space" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 124). If we can presume, along with Bhabha, the necessity to surmount these memetic interpretations, lest in reproducing preconceived epistemological ignorance, the reader would inevitably acknowledge that they are participating in a colonial gaze. Conrad thenceforth, is smart enough to let us recognize this mimetic act of reading through the character of Kurtz's mistress theoretically structured through a colonial gaze, by realizing that even if you are anticolonial, you will eroticize, and objectify the woman, unveiling a pattern of collective consciousness towards the representation of the colonized female subject, as it is "no good sending them [Europe] back a reflection, even an ideal reflection," (Fanon et al., 2005, p. 252). Fanon calls upon his readers in *The Wretched of the Earth,* to "waste no time in sterile litanies and nauseating mimicries," and to "leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them" (Fanon et al., 2005, p. 252).

## 4 Conclusion

In 2022, the Cambridge Union held a debate on the 3rd March entitled "This House regrets the fall of the British Empire"[7] where 26 voters cast their proposition, while 38 have abstained from voting. The proposed voters' visceral feelings of support for the cessation of the British Empire is deliberately yielded to the collectivist insignia of a sociopolitical fabric towards majoritarian political ideologies that extols colonialism as a verve of megalomania. Espousing this discourse, the above discussion has demonstrated how the novel warrants a bevy of deconstructive re-readings of supremacist ideologies within contemporaneous contexts. Although burgeoning reviews of *Heart* of *Darkness* duly regarded it as a yarn of a typical seaman that chronicles an epic voyage, paralleling that of classical heroes into the lower world; studying the novel contrapuntally would allow the reader to retrospectively reinterpret the epistemological complexity behind romanticizing the ideals of colonialism. Thenceforth, such a mode of interpretation is adumbrated to understand the reason for unearthing peripheral historical narratives within the canon – whether fictional or non-fictional – that tangentially mention the colony. Through Conrad's employment of modern techniques, he is not only able to erupt through hegemonic discourse, but also to victoriously excavate and unfold the distorted and deceitful notions ingrained within the dimensional imperialism/colonialism compartment.

The premised discussion has postulated the substantiality of highlighting the concomitant interrelationship of Victorianism and modernism, which in return, was able to unravel that the novella is a multi-perspectival, multilayered work that can be approached from a multiplicity of interpretations. Under careful scrutiny, a reader can come to conclude that Conrad's success in anthropomorphizing objects has deemed this work as the powerhouse of his radical repertoire, since a resurgence of interest in contextualizing the metaphorical motifs in the novel can still warrant an immense amount of scholarship. A case in point is Civitarese's (2021) study "Heart of darkness in the courtyard, or dreaming the COVID-19 pandemic," which incorporates that the COVID-19 pandemic is a heart of darkness since it is "a health and economic crisis unprecedented in human history" (Civitarese, 2021, p. 1).

To conclude, Conrad has prognosticated the future, as his prediction now bears a minutiae resemblance to what is happening in modern times. In 1922, he wrote to the philosopher Bertrand Russell, providing him with

**7** To view the debate: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTVY38qXKrY&ab_channel=CambridgeUnion.

his feedback on the latter's book *The Problem of China*. Conrad thereby voiced his own skepticism and mistrust of political panaceas stating:

> I have never found in any man's book or. talk anything. to stand up. against my deep-seated sense of fatality governing this man-inhabited world …. The only remedy for Chinamen and for the rest of us is a change of hearts, but looking at the history of the last 2000 years there is not much reason to expect it, even if man has taken to flying—a great "uplift" no doubt but no great change […]. (Zdzisław, 2007, p. 548–549)

Indeed, nothing has changed in Conrad's time and our time. As we live in a climate of anguish and mass intimidation instigated by continuous imperialistic invasions, we can look at this novel not only as a claustrophobic descent into the tormented souls of two aberrant men trapped in a society to incumbently perform, but as a gyroscope in the workings of state powers, who still incorporate religion as a palliative justification to colonize other races and groups of people. *Heart of Darkness* stood against and withstood the test of time: "As the ironic ending of *Heart of Darkness* makes clear, London is the *Citta Dolente*, the city of desolation, which in Dante constitutes the sixth circle of hell" (Orr, 1989, p. 104). As such, London does not mean a construction of a one-dimensional place, but a planetary symbol to envision a dynamic multidimensional engagement with the authorial powers of our contemporary times, who seek to conquer and rule other countries for their benefit. Conrad was able to break the glass ceiling of literary confinement by journeying into the darkness of human nature. A darkness that still prevails, for violence and war still have an enduring presence within the fabric of our human world.

**Funding information:** Authors state no funding involved.

**Author contributions:** Haneen Amirah performed the formal analysis and drafted the literature review. Areej Allawzi contributed to the literature review and performed the proofreading and editing of the manuscript. Ismail Almazaidah compiled the references and drafted the conclusion. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

**Conflict of interest:** Authors state no conflict of interest.

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