

# Africa Under Western Eyes: The Colonial Gaze and the Narrativization of Otherness in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Nouh Anajjar

Department of English, Mohammed Premier University, Oujda, Morocco  
[nouh.anajjar@ump.ac.ma](mailto:nouh.anajjar@ump.ac.ma)

Received: 20 Jul 2026; Received in revised form: 16 Aug 2026; Accepted: 22 Aug 2026; Available online: 27 Aug 2026  
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— This paper offers a postcolonial reflection on the role of the gaze, in relation to narration, in the process of representing and narrativizing the Self/Other dialectic in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The central argument is that the European gaze, as articulated through Marlow's narrative and focalization, is deeply embedded in the West's will to power and its desire to render the colonial Other visible, knowable, and, consequently, governable. More importantly, I argue that Marlow's gaze does not merely observe the African Other but also participates in constructing his identity, restricts his agency, and determines the conditions under which he can become visible and intelligible within the narrative. In this sense, the gaze functions as a narrative technology through which knowledge, visibility, voice, spatiality, and agency are unequally distributed between the European Self and the African Other. Nonetheless, this framework does not seek to reduce Conrad's novella to a simple or totalizing colonial discourse. Rather, it seeks to lay bare the mechanisms through which colonial power is reproduced within the narrative while remaining attentive to the instability and ambivalence of Marlow's position as narrator and focalizer.



**Keywords**— gaze, discourse, empire, representation, surveillance, narration, Otherness, negation, Manichean allegory, *Heart of Darkness*

“To gaze implies more than to look at—it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (Schroeder, 1998).

## I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of representation is of paramount significance as an integral part of Western colonial discourse. The very aim of representation has been to “make the Orient visible [and] clear,” as Edward Said (1978, 22) argues in his seminal work *Orientalism*. At this juncture, the discursive representation of Otherness in literary works remains a convoluted concern, largely because of the wide range of techniques, strategies, and rhetorical devices through which imperial power has historically produced and organized knowledge about the cultural Other. Among these strategies, the gaze and surveillance occupy a cardinal

position. Surveillance, as Roxanne L. Doty suggests, functions as a technique through which the non-Western subject is rendered a knowable and visible object of disciplinary power (1993, 11). The gaze, therefore, does not simply allow the observer to see; it establishes a particular relationship between the observer and the observed, transforming visual perception into a mechanism of knowledge and authority.

The importance of the gaze becomes particularly evident in colonial representations of Africa, where the European observer frequently occupies the position of the seeing and knowing subject, while the African Other is reduced to an object of observation. The writer/narrator's eye, while representing Otherness, is never innocent in so far as it is already preconditioned and restructured to view reality in terms of binary oppositions, or what Abdul Jan Mohamed labeled the Manichean allegory. David Spurr maintains that

"To gaze means to dominate ... to look and to speak implies a position of authority" (1993, 14). Western gaze is closely related to a "commanding view," through which the unknown is rendered visible and consequently brought within the conceptual and ideological framework of the observer. In this sense, to look and to speak are not innocent acts. They presuppose a position of authority and establish a hierarchy between the one who sees and the one who is seen.

Such a relationship between vision and power can be detected in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), a novella whose representation of Africa and Africans has generated considerable controversy within postcolonial criticism. The text has been interpreted both as a critique of European imperialism and as a work that remains deeply embedded in the Western colonial discourse and typifies the West's *will to power* alongside the West's *will to truth*. This tension prevents us from reducing the novella to a simple ideological interpretation. Rather than assuming a direct equivalence between Conrad and Marlow, this paper focuses primarily on the narrative operations through which Marlow's gaze constructs the African Other. Marlow is simultaneously a character, narrator, and focalizer, and his knowledge is therefore partial and mediated rather than genuinely omniscient.

I argue that through what may be described as a colonial or panoptic gaze, Marlow exercises considerable authority over the narrative space and participates in the cultural construction of the Other. His gaze does not simply record the African presence; it selects, organizes, describes, categorizes, and interprets it. Through this process, African bodies are frequently fragmented, dehumanized, and associated with wilderness, primitiveness, disease, and temporal backwardness. At the same time, African voices are marginalized, and African space is repeatedly represented as empty, mysterious, and available for Western exploration and appropriation. The gaze thus becomes a dynamic mechanism through which the identity of the Other is narratively constructed. The narrator not only controls the narrative space but also enacts a kind of cultural hegemony on the Other through narration by appropriating his existence and negating his agency. More importantly, this gaze becomes a dynamic mechanism of mapping and constructing the identity of the Other. Ultimately, the aim is to unearth the mechanisms of power and hegemony employed by the colonial and orientalist discourse.

## II. SURVEILLANCE: THE GAZE AS NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

To begin with, Marlow's narrative structure in *Heart of Darkness* is "homodiegetic," since the narrator is present as

a character in the story he tells (Genette 1980, 245). Marlow is therefore not an external observer standing outside the events. He participates in the narrative and simultaneously controls how those events are presented to the reader. The bulk of the story is recounted and seen from Marlow's I/Eye. As a focalizer, he occupies a privileged position from which he selects what becomes visible and what remains outside the field of representation.

Marlow's gaze is significantly situated and partial, yet it produces an effect of authority. His narrative repeatedly transforms his perceptions into the principal means through which the reader encounters Africa and its inhabitants. The African Other is therefore not encountered directly but through a European narrative consciousness that determines the dynamics of visibility. Marlow enjoys authority, and has the agency to construct the identity of the natives. Throughout the narrative, the natives are silenced, denied, muted, and obliterated, and their subjectivity is confiscated and eclipsed by the narrator's essentialist, totalizing, and Eurocentric gaze or what Genette has qualified as "the conquest of the I" (249).

Through Marlow's initial encounters with the Other, the process of Othering becomes increasingly apparent. His narrative can be understood in relation to what Said describes as an "overmastering" narrative (1978, 23), in which the authority of the narrator allows him to organize and interpret the cultural Other. Narration consequently becomes a process of selection. Marlow sheds light on particular scenes, bodies, landscapes, and gestures, rendering them visible within the narrative and thereby subjecting them to the imperial gaze. This idea can be observed in the following passages:

A boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled with black fellows; you could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening, they shouted, sang, their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks - these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there; they were a great comfort to look at. (1902, 19)

And, This scene of inhabited devastation: a lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants (1902, 22)

The verbal texture of these passages reveals how Marlow's gaze produces the African Other as a visible object. The Africans are not presented primarily as individualized subjects with histories, interiorities, or voices; instead, they are perceived through their bodies,

movements, and physical appearance. The description of their "wild vitality" associates them with nature and wilderness, while the comparison of the people to "ants" reduces individual human beings to an undifferentiated collective. Marlow's representation of the African Other thus becomes a process of reification and objectification. The Other is transformed into something that can be seen, classified, and interpreted by the European observer. Khalid Bekkaoui similarly argues that colonial fiction can dehumanize natives by depriving them of psychology and history and rendering them as decontextualized objects" (1998,19). In *Heart of Darkness*, this tendency is visible in the narrator's repeated reduction of African individuals to bodily forms, movements, and visual impressions. In another significant passage. Marlow writes,

Clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. 'They were dying slowly—it was very clear... These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. (1902, 24).

The Africans appear here as "shapes," almost indistinguishable from the landscape in which they are located. The representation of their bodies through pain, exhaustion, and disappearance reinforces the process through which the colonial subject is deprived of individuality and historical specificity. Marlow's gaze therefore produces not only visibility but also a particular form of visibility wherein the African is visible as an object of suffering, primitiveness, and physical decline. This process becomes even more explicit when Marlow observes: "I noticed that the crowd of savages was vanishing without any perceptible movement ... as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again" (1902, 86). The African figures are conceptually absorbed into the natural environment. The forest appears to produce and consume them, making them seem less like historical subjects than extensions of the landscape. The association between African identity and wilderness consequently becomes a powerful element in the production of Otherness.

### III. THE GAZE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

The representation of the African Other through Marlow's gaze is therefore closely connected to the construction of difference. Marlow's descriptions

repeatedly establish a distinction between the European Self and the African Other through a system of implicit binaries: civilized/savage, rational/irrational, historical/prehistoric, human/animal, and observer/observed. This process recalls JanMohamed's (1985) concept of the Manichean allegory, according to which colonialist discourse organizes cultural difference through a series of oppositions that privilege the colonizer and subordinate the colonized.

The word "comfort" in Marlow's description of the African boatmen is particularly significant. Marlow states that the men "were a great comfort to look at" (Conrad 1902, 19). The expression deserves a closer examination because it suggests that the African presence provides Marlow with a particular psychological reassurance. The Africans are represented as "natural," physically energetic, and visually available to the European observer. Their presence consequently becomes part of the colonial landscape through which the European Self recognizes itself. The Other's existence, whether in reality or in fiction, thus becomes a functional element in the construction of the Self. The African is required to appear as different so that the European identity can appear coherent and superior. This is precisely where representation intersects with power. The Other is not simply described; he is made to occupy a particular ideological position within the narrative.

In this sense, Marlow's commanding view echoes the Foucauldian dialectic of knowledge and power. The gaze presupposes knowledge, while knowledge creates the possibility of authority over its object. In a way reminiscent of the Foucauldian idea, Said argues that "to have knowledge of a thing is to dominate it and to have authority over it" (1978, 32). It is at this juncture that the ideological binarism comes to the fore; while the European self is represented as the knower, the observer, the powerful, the African Other incarnates the known, the observed, and the powerless. In *Heart of Darkness*, the European Self consequently appears as the knower, observer, and interpreter, while the African Other is repeatedly positioned as the known, observed, and interpreted. The power of Marlow's gaze and commanding view is pretty much evident in the subsequent quote,

Glancing down, I saw a face near my hand; the black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose, and the sunken eyes looked **up** at me. A kind of blind .... which died out slowly ...with great weariness and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse as in some picture of a massacre

or a pestilence. One of these creatures rose to his hands and knees and went off on all fours towards the river to drink (1902, 25)

Marlow's utterance above invites no further explanation given that the power of the gaze is beautifully captured within the precincts of Marlow's quote. Marlow's act of glancing down, not above, reflects a psychological relation of power in which the White is uninterrupted in a position of superiority and domination, looking down at the inferior Other. To put it in David Spurr's terms, Marlow is endowed with "a commanding view (and) a sense of mastery over the unknown and over what is often perceived by the western [narrator] as strange and bizarre" (1993, 15). By so doing, he allows no prospect of freedom and the interplay of differences. Conversely, this Other /the black is denied the capacity to look back since he is represented as a pathetically weak creature whose "sunken eyes" are "kind of blind". Marlow's act of negating the Other's ability to gaze can be put in opposition to his imperial representation of a white man whose commanding gaze is confirmed and reasserted. In fact, the physical arrangement of the bodies becomes a visual representation of the colonial hierarchy. The African is placed below the European not only geographically but symbolically.

This unequal asymmetry becomes more evident when Marlow describes a white man: "He was commonplace in complexion, in feature, in manners, and in voice ... his eyes of the usual blue ... and he certainly could make his glance fall on one as trenchant and heavy as an axe" (1902, 30). It appears clearly then that the juxtaposition between the differentiated representation of the "black" and the lofty portrayal of the white man echoes the Western system of binarism which Marlow futilely attempted to eschew. The juxtaposition between the representations of the African and the European reveals the operation of a racialized visual hierarchy. The African is associated with weakness, darkness, disease, and physical fragmentation, while the white man is associated with a powerful and penetrating gaze. The ability to look therefore becomes a form of symbolic power. In this framework, Abdul Jan Mohamed asserts that "Some of the works of even the "most enlightened and critical colonial writers eventually succumb to a narrative organization based on racial/metaphysical oppositions" (1985, 80).

#### IV. LOOKING AT THE OTHER: BODY, VOICE, VISIBILITY, AND DEHUMANIZATION

The natives are not only denied the ability to gaze at the white men, but also their very humanity is confiscated

and negated through Marlow's tautological determination to address the natives not as full human beings but as parts of the body, and as mere organs. Instead of being presented as individualized subjects, they frequently appear as parts of bodies or as collections of physical features: "bare feet," "pairs of eyes," and "a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hand clapping of feet stamping of bodies swaying of eyes rolling" (1902, 28–51). Furthermore, they are repeatedly described as "shadows," "black shapes," and "figures," terms that diminish their individuality and reinforce their status as objects within Marlow's field of vision,

"Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks." (1902, 24)

And

"They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now— nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom." (1902, 24)

"I made out deep in the tangled gloom naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes, human limbs in movement glistening of bronze color". (1902, 64)

The language of shadows and shapes contributes to the process of dehumanization because it transforms human subjects into visual impressions. This reverberates with Abdul Jan Mohamed's assertion that, "Just as imperialists 'administer' the resources of the conquered country, colonialist discourse 'commodifies' the native subject into a stereotyped object and uses him as a 'resource' for colonialist fiction" (1985, 82-83). Joseph Conrad, in this respect, commodifies the natives by negating their individuality and subjectivity, so that they are now perceived as generic beings that can be exchanged for any other native.

Besides denying the humanity of the Other, there is also what Johannes Fabian calls "the denial of coevalness". Throughout the novella, the natives are not only spatially separated from Europe but also temporally displaced. The African is represented as belonging to an earlier stage of human development and consequently excluded from the contemporary time of European civilization. The Other is a "prehistoric man (1902, 51), and clearly outside the contours of time. Marlow adds, "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 beginning of time" (1902, 58). Such temporal displacement reinforces the colonial binary between civilization and primitiveness.

The gaze also operates at the level of language. The African Other is frequently spoken about rather than allowed to speak. Even when African characters speak, their speech is presented as limited, fragmented, or linguistically marked. A revealing example occurs when an African servant reports the death of Kurtz: "Mistah Kurtz, he dead" (1902, 100). The sentence is grammatically simple, but its representation within Marlow's narrative is significant. The African voice enters the narrative only briefly and remains enclosed within Marlow's larger act of narration. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether the Other speaks, but whether the Other possesses narrative authority over his own speech and experience. The gaze consequently operates together with narration. To control the representation of the Other is also to control the conditions under which the Other becomes intelligible. The colonial subject may be visible, but his visibility does not necessarily grant him agency. He may appear within the narrative while remaining excluded from the authority to narrate himself.

## V. MAPPING THE OTHER: SPACE, EMPTINESS, AND COLONIAL APPROPRIATION

The technique of surveillance through the narrator's gaze extends beyond the bodies of the natives to the representation of African landscape and space. The terrestrial space of the Other is frequently depicted as a massive and unexplored emptiness, thereby creating an ideological justification for exploration, occupation, and appropriation. As Marlow puts it, "There were many blank spaces on the earth ... there was one yet the biggest, the most blank, that I had a hankering after" (1902, 11). He later describes Africa as "The empty immensity of earth, sky and water" (1902, 20). The repetition of "blank," "empty," and is significant because it constructs Africa as a space that lacks inhabitants before the arrival of the European observer. The land becomes visible as an object of Western desire and exploration. The terrestrial space of the Other is frequently depicted as a massive empty space, rationalizing therefore occupation and appropriation. Hence, the space of the cultural Other becomes a fertile ground to project onto Western anxiety and fantasies and anything that Western civilization and psyche is not. Pratt's discussion of the "monarch of all I survey" is particularly relevant here, since the colonial gaze frequently transforms geographical space into something that can be visually possessed before it is materially appropriated. (1992, 201).

Finally, the gaze in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* functions at multiple levels. *Darkness*. It not only observes the African body and places African culture in contradiction to the West but also renders African space available for

power projection and occupation. Thus, the African Other is consequently produced through a complex system of visual, narrative, spatial, and temporal distinctions.

## VI. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, this paper has sought to reflect on the gaze as a vital element in the representational technique of surveillance. As argued above, the gaze of the European writer/Self when narrativizing the African Other seems to be deeply imbued with the West's *will to power* and inspired by the Western process of constructing Otherness. Through surveillance at the level of the narrative structure of *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad exerts his hegemony and ascendancy by confirming White men's authority, negating the Other's identity, and commodifying his ontology and space. The gaze does not simply describe the African Other; it determines the conditions under which the Other becomes visible, intelligible, and narratable.

Through the narrative gaze, African bodies are frequently objectified, African voices are marginalized, and African space is represented as blank, empty, primitive, or outside the temporal framework of European modernity. The gaze may consequently be understood as a narrative technology of colonial representation. It establishes an asymmetrical relationship between Self and Other by privileging the European capacity to look, speak, classify, and narrate. The African Other may enter the narrative as a visible presence, yet this visibility does not necessarily translate into subjectivity or agency. What emerges, therefore, is an unequal economy of looking in which the European retains the position of the observer while the African is repeatedly confined to the position of the observed

For further research, it should be noted that this gaze can be reversed and displaced, thus constituting the possibility of resistance. It is important in this regard to refer to the Algerian critic Malek Alloula and his thought-provoking book *The Colonial Harem* (1986), in which he initiated a fascinating discussion and tried to dismantle the colonizer's gaze by articulating the gaze of the colonized. In this connection, the observer in this case becomes the observed, thus changing and destabilizing the mainstream rules of power relations and, by so doing, subverting the colonial authority. The possibility of such a reversal suggests that the gaze, although historically implicated in relations of domination, may also become a site from which those relations can be questioned and destabilized.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Alloula, Malek. (1986). *The Colonial Harem*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [2] Bekkaoui, Khalid. (1998). *Signs of Spectacular Resistance: The Spanish Moor and British Orientalism*. Najah El Jadida.
- [3] Conrad, Joseph. (1902). *Heart of Darkness*. Penguin.
- [4] Doty, Roxanne Lynn. (1993). Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines. *International Studies Quarterly*, 37(3).
- [5] Fabian, Johannes. (1983). *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. Columbia University Press.
- [6] Genette, Gérard. (1980). *Narrative Discourse*. Cornell University Press.
- [7] Jan Mohamed, Abdul R. (1985). The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature. *Critical Inquiry*, 12.
- [8] Pratt, Mary Louise. (1992). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge.
- [9] Said, Edward W. (1978). *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Penguin.
- [10] Schroeder, Jonathan E. (1998). Consuming representation: A visual approach to consumer research. In B. B. Stern (Ed.), *Representing Consumers: Voices, views and visions*. Routledge.
- [11] Spurr, David. (1993). *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Duke University Press.