

Decoding Deception and Distortion: A Feminist Perspective on Marlow's Deviation of Truth to Mr Kurtz's Intended in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* portrays an intimate connection between the realm of femininity and darkness. This paper explores Marlow's motives for deviation of truth from Mr Kurtz's Intended. Marlow and Kurtz deceive women to attain their goals, keeping them out of the pragmatic world and reaffirming their status as the 'second sex' or, more precisely, as the 'lost sex'. This study excavates Simone de Beauvoir's concept of 'the Other' in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. Examining how Marlow's distortion of the truth intersects with Beauvoir's exploration of the patriarchal tendency to marginalize and objectify women opens new opportunities to resolve the reason behind his deliberate deception and distortion of the truth to Mr Kurtz's 'Intended.'

Keywords: Deception, distortion, marginalize, 'The Other', patriarchy, truth, women

Introduction

Heart of Darkness is an eminent creation by Joseph Conrad, where he tries to shed light on the darkness hidden in the deepest core of the human heart. He has removed the hard coating of untruth, piercing one layer after another to decode the deception and distortion of truth and confront the truth with reality. Conrad wraps up the lies, takes the time, and creates the atmosphere for confronting the moments of truth. Conrad introduces us to Marlowe, and Marlowe takes us to a dark world where we meet a 'universal genius' named Mr Kurtz. He meditatively enters Congo, the heart of Africa, very slowly as if submersing into himself. Marlowe's storytelling style reminds us of the ancient mariner of S.T. Coleridge, and in both cases, the purpose is the same: redemption. Marlowe tells the tale of his distortion of truth and the darker side of colonialism. He deviates the truth to Mr Kurtz's fiancé and surrenders vulnerably to untruth. Marlowe himself has said that he detests lies, "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie" (Conrad 29), yet why he has to deceive and distort the truth is a matter of concern. Moreover, *Heart of Darkness* is a story about the distortion of the heart, unfolding through twists and turns. It narrates the journey of a sailor who claims to be an ardent pursuer of truth but becomes entangled in the allure of deceptive lies. One of the most striking moments in the story is Kurtz's dying declaration, "The Horror! The Horror!" (Conrad 68), about which Marlow deceives Kurtz's 'Intended'. Instead of revealing the grim "horror" that Kurtz encountered, Marlow chooses to soothe her by

deceivingly suggesting that Kurtz's final breath was striving to pronounce her name, implying that even in his last moments, Kurtz was engrossed with her thoughts. This article attempts to decode the underlying motives of Marlow's vulnerable capitulation to deceptions.

Marlow holds a profound admiration for Kurtz, thus making himself reluctant to deviate from the grand image of Kurtz. Almost a year after Mr Kurtz's demise, Marlow encounters Kurtz's fiancée, and it becomes evident that she, too, holds Kurtz in the highest esteem, perceiving him as the embodiment of virtue. In her eyes, she is the sole object of Kurtz's affection, believing his life was forfeited solely for her. However, this perception is a distortion of the truth that ensnares her within an illusory realm.

Marlow hesitates to shatter this fantasy and unveil the company's ruthless reality, as doing so would destroy her ideal world. He also believes that women are naive creatures to confront the harshness and cruelty of the external world. Consequently, he feels an 'unconscious loyalty' (Conrad 72) to patriarchy to shield women, delimiting them to remain cocooned in their realm of beauty.

Thus, Marlow inadvertently reaffirms women's long-standing subordination as he perpetuates the notion of male dominance. By deviating from the truth, Marlow paints an image of noble masculinity, which fosters a cycle wherein females perpetually revere the magnanimity of males.

Theoretical Framework

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir examines the impact of societal norms, historical contexts, and cultural constructs on the Marginalization and Subjugation of women. She argues that women are historically positioned as the 'Other' in relation to men, thereby creating a contrast where the male perspective is often considered the default human experience, and the female perspective is relegated to a secondary and subordinate status. She states:

"Thus humanity is male and male defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being." (Beauvoir 15)

Beauvoir adds,

She is simply what man decrees; thus, she is called 'the sex', which means that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposite to essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (pp.15-16)

Marlow consciously categorized the 'Intended' and other women in *Heart of Darkness* as the 'Other' and male as the 'Self'. The patriarchal society shapes women so they 'readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential.' (p.17)

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir says men and women never share equal positions in any aspect. The male makes social laws and norms to alienate the women from their world. They perceive that women will threaten their dominant position if they enter their world. Marlow's distorted truth handicapped the 'Intended' for the rest of her life. According to Beauvoir, "Woman has always been man's dependant if not his slave; the sexes have never shared the world in equality." (p.19)

Conrad, Kurtz, and Marlow—all these males perceive the 'Intended' as the 'Other'. Simultaneously, the woman willingly accepts the position of the 'Other' by embracing Kurtz's ascendancy and supremacy.

Literature Review

In society, there exists a clear demarcation between masculine and feminine traits. The notion of 'ideal men' is tied to gender constructs. Men are expected to exhibit perfection, moral superiority, and inner strength. In parallel, any presence of feminine attributes within men was often perceived as indicative of vulnerability and fragility. In *Genders*, David Glover and Cora Kaplan write about 'The Manly Ideal',

"At the centre of this ideal lay a renewed emphasis upon the perfectibility of the male body, which became an outward sign of a man's moral superiority and inner strength of character." (Glover and Kaplan 89)

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow holds Mr. Kurtz in exceptionally high regard, depicting him as an extraordinary individual endowed with a universal genius. Mr. Kurtz's role as an ivory collector distinguishes him uniquely. His brutal acts towards the natives and lack of humanity are framed as expressions of his profound inner strength. Conversely, Kurtz's 'Intended' character is portrayed as submissive, delicate, and vulnerable. Her defining traits centre around endurance, tolerance, and patience, which are perceived as manifestations of her inner strength. These distinctions between men and women are likely driven by societal norms, cultural beliefs, and traditional gender roles that dictate how individuals should behave and present themselves based on their gender. David Glover and Cora Kaplan argue:

"The differences between men and women had to be sharply emphasized, and feminine traits had to be kept firmly in their proper place: in men, they were a sign of weakness." (p.90)

This notion is reflected in Marlow's resolute commitment to upholding these gender disparities. He perceives any departure from conventional masculine attributes as unfavourable. Consequently, driven by this perspective, he deceives and distorts the truth to retain the opposing genders in their expected peripheries.

In her work *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi states, "In the end, victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity, under patriarchy, the male is always the victor" (Moi 103). This idea finds resonance in Marlow's distortion of Kurtz's dying declaration, changing the profound words "The horror! The horror!" which implies defeat and destruction into the deceptive statement, "The last word he pronounced was – your name." (p.75) suggesting Kurtz as a genuinely successful lover. This manipulation by Marlow serves as a declaration of male victory.

Marlow's motif of deception and distortion of truth to Mr. Kurtz's 'Intended' can be interpreted as a manifestation of the 'masculine fear of loss of the attribute' (p.109). He feels an 'unconscious loyalty' to uphold and protect the 'Proper' self of masculinity in front of the 'Intended'. Hélène Cixous elaborates on this idea of the proper as proper to the male' (Cixous 110) in her essay, "Castration or Decapitation?":

The realm of the Proper culture functions by the appropriation articulated, set in to play, by man's classic fear of seeing himself expropriated, seeing himself deprived...by his refusal to be deprived, in a state of separation, by his fear of losing the prerogative, fear whose response is all of History. Everything must return to masculine. (Cixous p50)

Jeremy Hawthorne's analysis in his work "Women in *Heart of Darkness*" presents a thought-provoking perspective on the portrayal of women. He explores the positioning of women, highlighting their deliberate detachment from reality—a state in which they are intentionally kept "out of it." In his words:

"Putting women on a pedestal, cutting them off from reality, and restricting them to a world of sterile ideals and lifeless illusion is as destructive as treating a woman purely as a recipient of passion." (Hawthorn p.153)

Garret Stewart writes in his work "Lying as Dying in *Heart of Darkness*":

‘Since we know that Marlow's own idol-like person seems an outward sign of such internalized idealism, internalized at the expense of full truth, we sense the reflexivity (Stewart 372): "bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before the great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself.’ (Conrad 74)

Stewart analyzes Marlow's behaviour and perception of his ideals and illusions. He holds onto this idealism even when it clashes with reality. "Reflexivity" denotes the interplay between Marlow's internalized ideals and his actions or perceptions. Marlow's actions and attitudes are influenced by his internalized ideal, even though that ideal may not align with the whole truth of a situation. Marlow expresses his reverence or "bowing" before the faith or ideal that resides within him. This ideal is described as a "great and saving illusion" that shines in the darkness with otherworldly radiance. The darkness mentioned here refers to the literal darkness of the African jungle and the symbolic darkness of the moral and psychological dimension.

Discussion

Women as 'The Other'

Mr. Kurtz's fiancée, the Intended, in *Heart of Darkness* embodies the concept of 'the Other' through her idealization and ignorance. Marlow narrates her as "the Other," and the motif of his deception and distortion of truth is to advance the process of 'othering'.

Simone de Beauvoir's renowned statement, "One is not born a woman one becomes one" (Beauvoir 283), is applicable here. Marlow distorts the truth to perpetuate the ongoing process of 'becoming' women. Sonia Kruks elaborates on this notion of 'becoming' women in her work "Women's 'Lived Experience': Feminism and Phenomenology from Simone de Beauvoir to the Present" as

'becoming' has a twofold sense. It refers not only to how one is 'constituted', both physiologically and societally but also to a process of self-constitution: how one constitutes *oneself* as a woman. It refers, that is, to how one *chooses* to take up one's situation, to how one assumes and lives as one's own, the irreducible amalgam of physical and societal characteristics that one both is and is not. (Kruks p.81) She further states:

‘A woman's body is lived as 'other' in a double sense: as both a set of often intrusive psychological processes and, at the same time, as her subjection to her societal designation as the Other.’ (p.81)

It is remarkable that the 'Intended' lacks a specific name; she remains the 'Intended' throughout the narration of *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad, Marlow, and even Kurtz refrain from using her name. They purposefully present her as nameless, employing various tactics to keep her 'out' of the world. Her tomb-like dwelling suggests that she is from a dead world. Marlow's distortion of the truth perpetually confines her to this lifeless realm of passivity. He counts her as the 'Other' as:

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are! They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up, it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and the whole thing over. (Conrad p.16)

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow consistently portrays women as the 'Other,' detached from reality and confined to a world of beauty and fragility. This portrayal suggests that if women were to engage in the

realistic world and lead this idealized sphere actively, its foundation would rapidly crumble due to their perceived lack of experience and incapacity to confront the complexities of the real world. Marlow's distorted truth helps to maintain traditional gender norms by depicting women as disengaged from reality, relegating them to an enclave of romanticized beauty.

The term 'Intended' implies her readiness to be claimed by a man. In a patriarchal society, men are deemed the exclusive possessors of women, as Anna Yeatman indicates:

"Under the conditions of household economy, wives, children, and household servants were located within the private property of masculine individuals." (Yeatman 287).

This notion is exemplified when Marlow describes Kurtz uttering, "You should have heard the disinterred body of Mr Kurtz saying, 'My Intended'". The sense of possession is stated as, "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—everything belonged to him." (Conrad, 2002, p.49)

To Kurtz, the 'Intended' is a mere possession, stripped of agency like his ivory, station, or river. Marlow deliberately distorts the truth to the 'Intended', ensuring she remains in the domain of male possession and perception, isolated from reality. This notion aligns with Nina Pelikan Strauss's observation:

It, therefore, follows that, merely by allotting women a leisure role, society has, in effect, excluded them from discovering reality; so it is by no choice or fault of hers that the Intended inhabits an unreal world Marlow's opinion of leisured women makes them negative examples of the idea that work is the basis of the individual's sense of reality. (Strauss p.204).

Marlow's deception and distortion of the truth can be decoded as an effort to treat women as inferior and naive beings incapable of confronting harsh realities.

Male Chauvinism

There is a scope to elucidate Marlow's deception of Kurtz's Intended from a male chauvinist standpoint. His chauvinistic tone is first reflected when he mentions his aunt, who helps him secure a job. In a tone of self-mockery, he says:

"Then –would you believe it –I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work –to get a job! Heavens!" (Conrad 12)

His subconscious mind wants to preserve the loyalty to the masculine supremacy and self-image of the males, driving him to distort the truth. Throughout his journeys, he perceives Mr Kurtz as a heroic figure, deeply admiring him. However, Marlow's perception of Kurtz drastically alters upon encountering him. Despite this transformation, Marlow refrains from exposing the true nature of Kurtz to his 'Intended'. This decision stems from his subconscious fear that unveiling the truth could tarnish men's culturally constructed reputations. Marlow confesses,

"I don't defend myself. I had no clear perception of what it was I really wanted. Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty or the fulfilment of one of these ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence. I don't know. I can't tell." (pp. 71-72)

As a male chauvinist, Marlow's primary concern is to uphold the honour and the supreme image of his gender. Revealing the truth about Kurtz to his Intended could cast a negative light on all men, tainting their standing in society. He perceives the Intended's behaviour as reflecting all women's attitudes toward men. The potential damage to the patriotic image, which Marlow cherishes deeply, becomes a pivotal reason for his decision to maintain the façade. If she neglects Kurtz, she, in his chauvinistic lens, neglects the entire male gender. In his perspective, this negligence could inflict harm upon the revered image of Noble Masculinity he holds in high regard.

Consequently, Marlow's male chauvinistic beliefs drive him to deviate from the truth to prevent any diminishing of the masculine pedestal he champions. Marlow's distortion serves as a means to safeguard his self-image and the male-centric framework he embodies. While Marlow yearns to enlighten her about Kurtz's descent into darkness, his conditioned beliefs regarding female vulnerability hinder him. He refrains from shattering the Intended's perceptions, allowing her to hold onto her illusions.

Living Through and for Patriarchy

Kurtz's Intended was born into an aristocratic family, boasting an elegant posture, a beautiful face, and a graceful temperament. However, she dwells within a "dark space," akin to a tomb, enduring many years of pedantry, boredom, and lifelessness. She finds herself relegated to an external space, existing in the shadow of Kurtz as if she were an extension of him.

Kurtz labels her as his 'Intended,' a term grammatically suggesting being 'desired or planned.' Strikingly, she does not possess any name or identity. She is treated as a possession of Kurtz. She serves merely as a vessel for the ambitions and aspirations of a white man. Reports indicate that Kurtz voyaged into the African jungle, driven by a quest for swift riches, all to secure a union with this aristocratic woman.

Adding to her plight, she falls prey to deception, misled by Marlow, steadfastly believing that Kurtz will forever hold her in his memory. However, she is oblivious to Kurtz's loss of humanity, his surrender to death accompanied by the haunting cry, "The horror! The horror!" This cry serves as his self-repentance, an acknowledgement of his guilt. Marlow deprives the right of Kurtz's "Intended" by distorting the truth and ensnaring her within an everlasting cage of beautifully woven romantic falsehoods. Marlow portrays the plight,

"I want –I want –something –something –to –to live with....His last word –to live with," She insisted. "Don't you understand I loved him –I loved him –I loved him!"

I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.

"The last word he pronounced was –your name." (Conrad, 2002, p.75)

Kurtz is the driving force behind her will to live. Her longing for Kurtz clarifies why his demise devastates her and extinguishes her will to continue living. Sensing her dilemma, Marlow deceives and distorts the truth to her, "not only to escape the darkness that enveloped Kurtz but also to perpetuate a world in which women are depended upon men, no matter how falsely virtuous they the men to be" (Ali, 2008, p.3). For the 'Intended', Kurtz embodies a paradoxical existence of being "live in death."

For her, he had died only yesterday, and by Jove, the impression was so powerful that for me, too, he seemed to have died only yesterday—nay, this very minute. I saw her and him in the same instance of time—his death and her sorrow—I saw her sorrow in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together—I heard them together. (p.73)

Marlow's distorted truth maintains a societal construct where women's dependence on men persists. Consequently, women become the victims of the patriarchal social system. She dedicates herself eternally to Kurtz, even in his demise, maintaining her chasteness for him with a willing heart. In a patriarchal society, her actions carry a certain dignity. Thus, this girl is living through and for patriarchy, holding the beautifully distorted truth.

Marginal Role of Women

Marlow finds it reasonable to endorse the peripheral roles of the women, aligning with stereotypes, as the alternative would involve assigning them an unsuitably masculine perspective. It reflects the

prevailing patriarchal attitudes, where men were seen as the central figures in society, and women were expected to play a marginal role.

"Oh, she is out of it –completely. They –women, I mean –are out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest our world gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it." (p.49)

The world is divided into two distinct spheres: one associated with masculinity and the other with femininity. Men assume qualities as "rational, strong, protective, and decisive, they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (Tyson 16). Marlow assumes a self-proclaimed role as rational, strong, and proactive, embodying traditional masculine traits. He plays a pivotal role in excluding Kurtz's "Intended" from the pragmatic realities of the world. Marlow's apprehension arises from the possibility of women attaining equal footing with men, which he believes could undermine the established male dominance. This fear leads Marlow to engage in deliberate deception of the "Intended." Through his distortion of the truth, he convinces himself that he is safeguarding and assisting her in maintaining the purity of her secluded world.

Marlow's motive to deceive the "Intended" is a thoughtful effort to uphold the patriarchal social structure. By marginalizing women, he seeks to preserve the patriarchal hierarchy that grants men a central position. This underlying objective significantly contributes to Marlow's decision to distort the truth while confronting Kurtz's "Intended."

Mourning for Men is a Virtue

In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz's "Intended" passionately and proudly embraces the act of mourning, perceiving it as an honourable virtue. Her intense expression of grief unveils her inclination to idealize him. In a patriarchal society, men tend to be placed on a pedestal, attributing them heroic traits. The "Intended's" enthusiastic mourning can be interpreted as a manifestation of the tendency to idolize men. She believes Kurtz is worthy of such profound mourning, which signifies Kurtz's greatness and godliness. Such beliefs shed light on how patriarchal paradigms can shape women's perspectives, prompting them to uphold and defend male authority.

The passionate mourning exhibited by the "Intended" highlights the gender roles intertwined with societal expectations. The "Intended" seems to cherish her sorrow and delight in her mourning for Mr Kurtz:

She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, I—I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves. But while we were still shaking hands, such a look of awful desolation came upon her face that I perceived she was one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time. (Conrad p.73)

Marlow deceives and distorts the truth to her, driven by the intention to ensure Kurtz's continued idealization. Patriarchy significantly influences her psyche, fostering a belief that mourning for men is a virtuous undertaking. In the eyes of society, she is elevated to the status of a pure and pious figure due to her adherence to this perceived virtue. She even considers herself fortunate to have the opportunity to mourn for men, showcasing the extent of her devotion. As she proclaims, "I have been very happy—very fortunate." (p.74)

This declaration solidifies her commitment to the concept of male worship and virtuousness. Her devotion encapsulates the far-reaching impact of patriarchal norms.

Conclusion

Marlow's deception and distortion of the truth in *Heart of Darkness* is a multi-layered interplay of gender roles, male chauvinism, and patriarchal ideals. By distorting truth, Marlow maintains male dominance, reinforces women's subordination, and sustains a world where women's dependence on men persists. His deception perpetuates the 'Otherness' of women, mirroring Beauvoir's notion. This study sheds light on the intricate dynamics of gender, power, and deception within Conrad's narrative. Marlow is telling the tale of his distortion, aiming to break the spell of darkness that has encapsulated his heart, similar to how S.T. Coleridge's Mariner sought redemption from his guilt:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns;
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns. (Coleridge, p. 437, Line 583-585)

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