



Post-colonial Encounters in the fictions of Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT:

Colonialism is a discourse based on racist assumptions of European 'superiority'. Europe characteristically represented it as a civilizing mission that would bring enlightenment to less developed parts of the world and their supposedly 'backward' peoples. With the Bible in one hand and sword in the other the Europeans explored almost the whole world and 'More than three quarters of the people living in the world today have badly their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism' Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989). The term 'colonialism' itself has become a very popular topic in the literary, political and social spheres of life. This dissertation is about the "Post-colonial Encounters in the writings of Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forster" based on 'Heart of Darkness' and 'A Passage to India'. It appears that the topic covers the attitude of both the writers towards the native colonized people. The dissertation also covers the political visions of the natives and their critical overview of the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Besides, it is an attempt to probe their moral vision and uncover their prejudice and attitude of them.

This paper explores the post-colonial themes embedded in the works of Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster, with a focus on Heart of Darkness (1899) and A Passage to India (1924). Although both authors wrote in the colonial era, their novels critically engage with imperial ideologies and present ambivalent portrayals of colonial encounters. This study examines how Conrad and Forster interrogate colonialism, the 'Other', and the limitations of cross-cultural understanding. Through a comparative and post-colonial lens, the paper highlights their narrative techniques and ideological tensions that anticipate later post-colonial discourse.

Keywords: Most Important Keywords in this dissertation are colonialism, post-colonialism, encounter, dominating, Empire, subordination, colonizers, colonized, superiority, imperialism, power, racism, Identity, Otherness, Narrative.

Introduction:

Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster occupy unique positions in the literary canon as writers whose works predate formal post-colonial theory but embody many of its concerns. Both authors wrote during the height of the British Empire, yet their texts reflect an uneasy relationship with imperial authority. This paper critically examines Heart of Darkness and A Passage to India, focusing on the thematic and narrative representations of colonialism, cultural difference, and identity.

Colonialism is "The practice by which a powerful country controls another country or other countries, the practice or policy of maintaining colonies; the alleged policy of exploiting of backward or weak peoples." It refers to the relationship between Europe and the other parts of the world dominated by them; it is the imposition of a Eurocentric world on the other. Above all, it is a relationship of the self and other. It is also a complex psychological tendency that induces the other to adopt European ways of thinking. The relationship of the colonizer and the colonized is a relationship of power, domination and hatred.

It is true that the manifestation of colonialism gears up the colonizers to extend their authority into other parts of the world through military conquests, political annexation, settlements and many other means. Applying all the apparatus of power they leave no stone unturned in vivifying a contrasting discrepancy which deliberately tries to prove that natives are inferior to them. "In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon (1952) presents the complex psychological effects of colonialism that induced the Black man to adopt white ways, and draws attention to the role of the colonizer's language in enforcing an internalized sense of inferiority and in suppressing native tradition and history". As colonialism is mostly associated with military and political coercion, it imposes the yoke of a foreign culture upon the shoulder of the natives. Consequently, a hybrid culture emerges because of the continuous interaction.

2. Post-colonial Theory and Literary Criticism:

Post-colonial theory emerged as a critical framework in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly after the formal end of European empires in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. It seeks to analyze, deconstruct, and challenge the lasting legacies of colonialism in literature, politics, culture, and identity. Post-colonial literary criticism addresses how colonial power dynamics are represented and how texts either reinforce or subvert colonial ideologies.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) laid the groundwork for understanding how Western literature and academia constructed the East as exotic, backward, and inferior. Said argued that this "othering" served as a justification for imperial domination and control. His analysis revealed how cultural texts participated in the ideological structures of empire.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", interrogated the ability of Western discourse to represent colonized subjects authentically. She highlighted the marginalization of subaltern voices and called attention to the epistemic violence enacted through colonial narratives.

Homi Bhabha introduced key concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and the ambivalence of colonial discourse. Bhabha argued that colonial authority was never stable or absolute; instead, it was constantly undermined by the contradictions and resistance of the colonized. His work emphasized the performative and contested nature of identity in the colonial context.

These theoretical perspectives are invaluable when examining the fictions of Conrad and Forster. Their narratives reflect the cultural anxieties, ambiguities, and contradictions that post-colonial critics seek to unpack. The lens of post-colonial theory allows for a deeper understanding of how these authors engage with issues of power, race, and identity, even as they are implicated in the very structures they critique

3. Conrad's Heart of Darkness:

Empire and Moral Ambiguity Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is often seen as a seminal text in post-colonial studies. The novella presents the European mission in Africa as exploitative and hollow. Through Marlow's journey into the Congo, Conrad unveils the hypocrisy of the civilizing mission. Kurtz, the emblem of European imperialism, descends into madness and moral depravity, symbolizing the corrupting force of unchecked power. Yet, Conrad's representation of Africa and Africans has drawn criticism, most notably from Chinua Achebe, who accused the author of racism and dehumanization. The novella portrays Africans as voiceless and inscrutable, reinforcing stereotypes even as it critiques imperialism. The ambiguity of Conrad's stance complicates his place in post-colonial discourse, making *Heart of Darkness* both a critique and a product of its time.

3. 1. Postcolonial Criticism on Conrad's Heart of Darkness

Key Critics: Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha

1). Achebe's Critique: In his famous 1975 lecture "An Image of Africa," Chinua Achebe accused Conrad of racism, arguing that *Heart of Darkness* dehumanizes Africans and reinforces colonial stereotypes. Achebe claimed that Conrad presents Africa as "a place of negations," reducing its people to savages and props in the white man's journey.

2). Said's Reading: In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said situates *Heart of Darkness* within the discourse of imperialism. He suggests that while the novella critiques imperial cruelty, it still operates within an imperialist framework and does not fully escape Eurocentrism.

3). Ambiguity in Representation: Some postcolonial critics argue that the text's ambiguous and ironic tone resists a purely racist reading, suggesting Conrad critiques European hypocrisy by exposing the darkness within European civilization itself.

3. 2. Psychoanalytic Criticism

Key Critics: Edward Said, Peter Brooks, Frederick R. Karl

1). Conrad's novella can be read as an exploration of the unconscious, repression, and the Freudian concept of the id. Kurtz represents the unleashing of primal desires when societal constraints are removed.

2). Marlow's journey is often interpreted as an inward psychological journey, a descent into the darkest recesses of the human psyche.

3). The jungle becomes a metaphor for the subconscious mind untamed, mysterious, and threatening.

3. 3. Modernist Criticism

Key Traits: Fragmentation, ambiguity, unreliable narration

1). *Heart of Darkness* is a cornerstone of literary modernism. The narrative structure Marlow's story within a story challenges linear storytelling and clear meaning.

2). Conrad's prose style, rich in irony and ambivalence, reflects modernist concerns about the instability of language and truth.

3). Critics highlight the way Conrad uses light and dark imagery to explore the moral ambiguity of imperialism and human nature.

3. 4. Feminist Criticism

Key Concerns: Marginalization of female characters, gendered representations

- 1). Feminist critics have pointed out the lack of developed female characters in *Heart of Darkness*. The few women who appear Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's Intended, and the African mistress are idealized or silenced.
- 2). These women function symbolically rather than as full individuals, reinforcing patriarchal structures.
- 3). Some scholars suggest that Conrad uses women as figures of illusion, contrasting them with the harsh "truths" men must face in the colonial world.

3. 5. *Ecocriticism*

- 1). More recent interpretations examine *Heart of Darkness* through an ecological lens, focusing on its representation of nature as both sublime and threatening.
- 2). The novella's dense descriptions of the African jungle suggest a force beyond human comprehension and control, which some read as a critique of anthropocentric views.

3. 6. *Political and Historical Criticism*

- 1). Critics analyze the historical context of Belgian colonialism in the Congo, particularly the atrocities committed under King Leopold II.
- 2). *Heart of Darkness* is seen by some as a whistleblowing text, revealing the brutal realities of European imperialism masked by the rhetoric of "civilizing missions."

4. Forster's *A Passage to India*:

Empire and Human Connection In contrast, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* foregrounds the cultural and racial divides between colonizers and the colonized. Set in the fictional Indian city of Chandrapore, the novel explores the possibility and impossibility of friendship between Indians and the British under colonial rule. The central incident in the Marabar Caves destabilizes cross-cultural relationships, exposing the deep-rooted mistrust and power imbalances that govern them. Forster critiques the arrogance and moral failure of British officials while sympathizing with the Indian characters, particularly Dr. Aziz. However, the novel's conclusion is famously ambiguous, as Aziz and Fielding part ways, unable to bridge the colonial divide. Forster implies that genuine connection is unattainable while the imperial structure remains intact.

4. 1. *Postcolonial Criticism on Forster's A Passage to India*

Key Critics: Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Benita Parry, Sara Suleri

- 1). **Ambivalence of Empire:** Forster critiques British colonialism, showing the cultural arrogance and racial prejudice of the British in India. However, critics debate whether Forster ultimately transcends colonial ideology or remains complicit in it.
- 2). **Edward Said:** In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said suggests Forster is sympathetic to Indians but cannot imagine a real political alternative to imperialism. The novel ends without a clear vision of a post-colonial future—highlighting the limits of liberal humanism.
- 3). **Benita Parry:** Challenges Said by emphasizing Forster's genuine critique of empire and his nuanced portrayal of colonial contradictions.
- 4). **Homi Bhabha:** Emphasizes the novel's portrayal of *mimicry*, hybridity, and the instability of colonial authority, particularly through characters like Aziz and the interactions between East and West.

4. 2. *Feminist Criticism*

Key Focus: Representation of women, gender and imperialism, cultural positioning

- 1). Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore are often examined for how their identities are shaped by colonial and gender dynamics.
- 2). Critics point out that women, while central to the narrative, are constrained by both British patriarchy and colonial attitudes.
- 3). The cave incident a turning point in the novel has been read as an allegory for sexual anxiety, fear of the Other, and the collapse of imperial

certainty. Feminist critics argue that Adela's breakdown reflects both gendered repression and the disruptive force of the colonized space.

4. 3. *Psychoanalytic Criticism*

- 1). The Marabar Caves are symbolic of the unconscious a void or echo chamber that erases meaning. They disrupt all rational frameworks: political, spiritual, personal.
- 2). Mrs. Moore's experience in the caves leads to existential despair, representing a psychological confrontation with emptiness or the loss of metaphysical assurance.
- 3). Adela's experience can be interpreted as a sexual hallucination or projection of internal fears, especially around race, gender, and autonomy.

4. 4. *Modernist Criticism*

Key Traits: *Formal experimentation, narrative ambiguity, existential themes*

- 1). Forster blends traditional realism with modernist techniques, particularly in the representation of interiority, fragmented perception, and the breakdown of communication.
- 2). The narrative explores themes of alienation, spiritual emptiness, and the inadequacy of language hallmarks of modernist fiction.
- 3). Critics note that Forster's prose and the symbolic use of landscapes (especially the Marabar Hills) reflect a deeper anxiety about meaning and connection.

4. 5. *Humanist and Liberal Criticism*

- 1). **Traditional View (1950s–70s):** Forster was seen as a liberal humanist who advocated for personal relationships and spiritual connections over imperial bureaucracy and political domination. The friendship between Fielding and Aziz was idealized as a hopeful symbol of cross-cultural understanding.
- 2). **Contestation by Later Critics:** Postcolonial scholars argue that such readings ignore the systemic critique of empire and downplay the novel's skepticism about whether East and West can ever truly "meet."

4. 6. *Thematic and Symbolic Criticism*

- 1). **Three-part structure:** *Mosque, Caves, Temple* representing different spiritual and philosophical domains (Islamic harmony, Hindu chaos, and Indian mysticism).
- 2). **Echo as motif:** The echo in the caves symbolizes the failure of communication, the void at the heart of colonial relations, and the disintegration of rational thought.
- 3). **Nature vs. Empire:** The Indian landscape is often portrayed as unknowable, overwhelming, and resistant to British attempts at control.

5. **Comparative Analysis:**

Both authors reveal the psychological and cultural impacts of colonialism. While Conrad's critique is veiled in allegory and moral introspection, Forster's is more overt and grounded in social realism. Conrad emphasizes the darkness within the imperial psyche, while Forster examines how colonialism distorts human relationships. Narratively, Conrad employs a modernist, layered structure that creates distance and ambiguity. Forster, on the other hand, uses a more accessible, linear form to probe colonial dynamics. Both, however, disrupt the imperial narrative of benevolence and progress. Empire, Otherness, and Narrative Strategy Both Conrad and Forster engage with the idea of "Otherness," portraying the colonized as fundamentally different yet central to the colonial experience. In *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is depicted as a place of darkness and mystery, reflecting European anxieties. Conrad's use of a frame narrative and modernist techniques emphasizes fragmentation and moral ambiguity. Forster adopts a realist style that allows deeper psychological insight into characters from both sides of the colonial divide. While Conrad explores the collapse of European

ideals, Forster exposes the social and cultural barriers that sustain empire. Despite their differences, both authors reveal the fragility of imperial authority and the human costs of colonialism.

Colonialism and Empire

- 1). Conrad critiques the brutality and moral emptiness of imperialism. Marlow sees that the so-called civilizing mission is a mask for exploitation, embodied by Kurtz's descent into savagery.
- 2). Forster, on the other hand, focuses on the psychological, cultural, and interpersonal effects of empire. He critiques both the arrogance of the British and the misunderstandings between Indians and Britons.

Key Difference: Conrad exposes the horror of colonialism through the metaphor of "darkness" (within Africa and within man), while Forster explores the failure of cross-cultural understanding under colonial rule.

Representation of the Colonized

- 1). In *Heart of Darkness*, Africans are mostly silent, faceless figures, used to reflect the narrator's inner journey or European anxiety. Achebe famously called this dehumanizing and racist.
- 2). In *A Passage to India*, Indian characters like Dr. Aziz are more fully developed. While Forster is not free of colonial attitudes, he does give voice and complexity to the colonized.

Key Difference: Forster provides subjectivity to colonized individuals; Conrad denies them agency or interiority.

5.3. Symbolism and Ambiguity

- 1). Conrad uses the jungle and the river as symbols of the subconscious, danger, and moral ambiguity. The famous line "The horror! The horror!" leaves readers uncertain about what exactly Kurtz saw or meant.
- 2). Forster's Marabar Caves serve a similar symbolic role they represent the void, the breakdown of meaning, and existential confusion. The echo that "seems to mock everything" parallels Conrad's darkness.

Shared Trait: Both authors use landscape as metaphor for internal and cultural breakdown.

Character Relationships Across Cultures

- 1). In Conrad, there is no meaningful relationship between colonizer and colonized; the contact is violent, opaque, or morally corrupt.
- 2). In Forster, the friendship between Fielding and Aziz seems to offer hope for connection but ultimately fails, partly due to imperial pressures.

Key Point: Both novels suggest true cross-cultural understanding is impossible within the context of imperialism.

Narrative Structure and Modernism

- 1). Conrad's frame narrative (a story within a story) and Marlow's shifting perceptions make the novella a hallmark of literary modernism—ambiguous, introspective, and metafictional.
- 2). Forster, while more traditional in form, also shows modernist tendencies, particularly in his use of disruption, dissonance, and symbolism (especially in the Marabar section).

Common Thread: Both works reflect modernist skepticism about truth, progress, and communication.

Endings and Implications

- 1). *Heart of Darkness* ends with moral uncertainty, as Marlow lies to Kurtz's Intended and leaves the reader unsure whether any moral clarity is possible.

2). *A Passage to India* ends with geographic and symbolic separation Aziz and Fielding part ways, with nature itself rejecting unity: "Not yet."

Key points: Both endings resist closure, suggesting the incompatibility of ideals with colonial realities.

6. Critiques and Post-colonial Re-evaluations

Recent scholarship has reassessed both authors from post-colonial perspectives. Conrad's narrative complexity is praised for exposing imperial hypocrisies, even as his racial attitudes are scrutinized. Forster is lauded for giving voice to Indian characters and highlighting systemic injustice, though his liberal humanism is seen by some critics as insufficiently radical. Both texts illustrate the limits of colonial understanding and the psychological toll of empire. They serve as precursors to post-colonial literature that centers the voices and experiences of the formerly colonized.

7. Post-colonial Frameworks and Legacy:

From a post-colonial perspective, both novels anticipate later critiques of Eurocentrism and cultural hegemony. They expose the violence both physical and psychological at the heart of colonial enterprise. At the same time, their limitations underscore the need for post-colonial voices that center the experiences of the colonized. Their works remain valuable in post-colonial studies not because they are free of colonial biases, but because they offer insight into the ideological contradictions of empire from within.

8. Rational of the study:

Both Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster were prominent British writers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period marked by intense colonial expansion and imperial dominance. The study aims to delve into their works against the backdrop of the colonial history of the time, exploring how their narratives reflect, respond to or critique the colonial experiences and encounters of the era.

Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster are acknowledged as major figures in English literature, and their works often deal with themes of imperialism, cultural clash, and the impact of colonialism on individuals and societies. The study seeks to contribute to the understanding of these literary giants by critically analyzing their representations of post-colonial encounters, shedding light on the nuances of their narratives, characterizations, and perspectives.

The choice to study both Conrad and Forster allows for a comparative analysis of their approaches to post-colonial encounters. By analyzing their works, the study can identify similarities and differences in their perspectives, styles, and thematic emphases. Comparative analysis provides a richer understanding of how different authors, despite sharing a historical context, may approach and represent post-colonial encounters in distinct ways.

9. Conclusion:

Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster offer invaluable insights into the colonial condition. Their novels critique imperialism while grappling with its ideological and psychological complexities. Through post-colonial analysis, we uncover the contradictions within their works, recognizing both their contributions and limitations. These texts remain essential for understanding the literary legacy of colonialism and its ongoing relevance in post-colonial discourse.

Both Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster speak of crossing the boundaries of culture and reaching out to the 'Other,' thereby turning their fictions into grand narratives of transculturalism. Conrad, in his novella 'Heart of Darkness' and E. M. Forster, in his novel 'A Passage to India' feel an urgency to bridge up the gap between European imperialists and the natives, between the colonizer and the colonized, the exploiter and the ex-ploited, whites and blacks, between 'us' and 'them,' thus advocating obliteration of all binary oppositions. Achebe might have criticized Conrad for his 'racist' bias but throughout his novel the focus is on transculturalism, going across boundaries. Kurtz failed because he could not 'connect' properly. Forster speaks of the same in *A Passage to India* on a larger scale but in a more explicit manner. There are several attempts to 'connect' at personal, social, cultural, political, and even spiritual levels in the book. In the course of the novel Forster is in search of a 'lasting home' ("The Hill of Devi") under an open sky where people can come together on equal terms putting aside their racial and religious identities. Both Conrad and Forster are, thus, to be examined not just from a post-colonial perspective but from a broader philosophical one, where all lines of demarcation become dissolved and human entity is upheld. In this respect, both writers' cross temporal and spatial boundaries and become universal.

Both Conrad and Forster were a numerous author in their own time, both have each characteristic of the way they express ideas about colonialism in their own literary works. In Conrad's writing we can see that most of natives were exploited cruelly like a slave, and they were forced more to work in their own natural land by using their own natural resources. The ways west exploit them by physical appearance look so much different, they using perfect clothes and having an authority for using the gun. Sometimes they use their gun to make the natives became so afraid to them. The way they exploit everything from the land of Africa, treated their human resources like an animal, put the iron chain as a sign of colonial power or to make them different than the colonizers.

It is quite different with what has been expressed in Forster's novel, There is no any physical content anymore but he emphasized more in the way west exploit the east through the negative behaviour or attitude. Indian could get a proper education but the idea of superiority has never make an equality for both sides even the idea of dominating and exploiting the east still exist, but practically they have a little bit different style based on above description.

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