



International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts, Science, Engineering & Management

Volume 12, Issue 3, May - June 2025



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 8.028



Narrativising and Critiquing the Imperial: A Study of Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad and the River between by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

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ABSTRACT: This project examines Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* to analyze their narrative strategies in depicting and critiquing imperial ideologies and their impact. By comparing the portrayal of colonial encounters, the representation of the 'Other,' and the authors' narrative stances, this study explores how these novels both reflect and challenge the dominant discourses of imperialism. *Heart of Darkness* offers a Western perspective on the brutal realities of the Congo, while *The River Between* provides an indigenous account of the cultural and psychological disruptions caused by colonial intrusion in Kenya. Ultimately, this analysis aims to highlight the complex ways in which literature engages with the historical and ongoing legacies of imperialism.

I. INTRODUCTION

This project initiates a comparative literary investigation of two significant works, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, aiming to unravel the intricate narratives and critiques of imperialism they convey. Although they are distinct in time, location, and cultural backdrop, both texts intersect on a common ground: the analysis of the profound and frequently devastating consequences of colonial interactions. Conrad's novella, set in the late 19th-century Belgian Congo, explores the dark corners of the human mind as it confronts the moral and ethical challenges posed by imperialist expansion. Ngũgĩ's novel, based on the early 20th-century Gikũyũ experience in colonial Kenya, presents a poignant depiction of the cultural and societal upheavals instigated by the enforcement of Western values and power dynamics. Through the comparison of these two narratives, this project aspires to shed light on the multifaceted nature of imperial representations and their lasting impacts. It will investigate the common and differing literary techniques utilized by both authors to illustrate the imperial experience, as well as how these narratives contribute to a broader critique of colonialism. The analysis will focus on the formation of "otherness," the interplay of language and authority, and the complex relationship between culture and identity amid imperial supremacy. This research aims to deliver a refined comprehension of how literature can serve as a potent instrument for both mirroring and contesting the prevailing narratives of its era.

Moreover, the project will investigate the ongoing significance of these texts in modern postcolonial discussions. By scrutinizing the authors' literary methods and thematic issues, the research aims to reveal how these narratives persist in shaping our perceptions of power, identity, and representation in a globalized setting. The study will also consider the ethical dimensions of literary representation in colonial and postcolonial timelines, addressing the ongoing discussions surrounding cultural appropriation and the obligations of authors in depicting marginalized communities.

LITERARY REVIEW

The current scholarly work on *Heart of Darkness* is vast, with critical focus given to its motifs of moral uncertainty, the "othering" of colonized groups, and the psychological ramifications of imperialism. Edward Said's influential critique in *Culture and Imperialism* situates Conrad's writing within the larger framework of Western imperial discourse, emphasizing its role in sustaining colonial stereotypes and reinforcing the dichotomy between the civilized West and the primitive "other." Researchers have also investigated Conrad's language and imagery usage to convey a sense of moral decline and psychological confusion, reflecting the corrupt influence of imperial ambitions. Analyses of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* frequently center around its examination of cultural conflict, the quest for identity, and the endurance of indigenous traditions against colonial incursion. Ngũgĩ's writing is acclaimed for its compelling counter-narrative, contesting colonial portrayals and reclaiming African agency. Scholars such as Simon Gikandi have dissected Ngũgĩ's language and narrative techniques to assert the significance of indigenous knowledge and customs, as well as to challenge the dominant discourse of colonialism. The interaction between traditional Gikũyũ culture and the advancing Western influence has been a significant area of critical inquiry, illuminating the intricate negotiations of identity and belonging within a colonial framework. Although comparative studies of Conrad and Ngũgĩ are not very frequent, they provide a meaningful perspective on the progression of postcolonial literature and the various responses



writers have made to the effects of imperialism. This project will utilize these established critical frameworks, while also aiming to identify new pathways for comparative analysis, concentrating on the particular literary methods and storytelling strategies employed by both authors to critique imperial endeavors.

Existing scholarly critiques on *Heart of Darkness* frequently emphasize its examination of European imperialism and its investigation of the “dark side” of humanity. Critics like Chinua Achebe have famously opposed Conrad's depiction of Africa, arguing that it reinforces racist stereotypes and dehumanizes African individuals. In contrast, research on *The River Between* highlights its function as a postcolonial counter-narrative, celebrating Gikuyu cultural perseverance and critiquing the harmful effects of colonial education. Scholars point out Ngũgĩ's employment of language and indigenous cultural symbols to reclaim authority and resist colonial dominance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research initiative seeks to accomplish the following goals via a comparative study of *Heart of Darkness* and *The River Between*:

Examine the Depiction of Imperialism: To delve into the portrayal of power relations, cultural interactions, and the creation of “otherness” in both works, concentrating on how these stories shed light on the nuances of Belgian and British colonialism. This involves exploring how each author depicts the relationship between colonizers and the colonized.

Investigate the Influence of Language and Narrative: To analyze the significance of language and narrative in shaping and contesting colonial discourse, focusing on metaphor, symbolism, narrative perspective, and indigenous language. The objective is to comprehend how language is utilized to assert dominance, forge identity, and challenge dominant narratives.

Identify and Contrast Literary Techniques: To pinpoint and compare the literary devices and genre conventions utilized by Conrad and Ngũgĩ to express their respective criticisms of imperialism. This encompasses examining narrative form, stylistic elements, and the application of literary tropes.

Place Literary Representations in Context: To situate these literary portrayals within their respective historical and cultural frameworks, emphasizing the specifics of Belgian colonialism in the Congo and British colonialism in Kenya. This entails scrutinizing the social, political, and economic influences that shaped these narratives. Evaluate Lasting Relevance: To determine the lasting significance of these narratives in modern postcolonial discourse, with an emphasis on their contributions to understanding the legacies of imperialism and the ongoing quest for cultural identity and social equity. This includes investigating how these works continue to resonate with present-day readers and scholars.

The central aim of this project is to analyze how Joseph Conrad and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o narrate and critique the imperial endeavor in *Heart of Darkness* and *The River Between*. This entails examining the authors' representations of race, language, cultural identity, and the psychological effects of colonialism. The research aspires to identify both commonalities and differences in the literary strategies employed by the writers to convey their critiques of imperial power.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Heart of Darkness: The historical setting of *Heart of Darkness* is the Belgian Congo in the late 19th century, a time defined by the cruel and exploitative reign of King Leopold II. Leopold's private territory, the Congo Free State, was a hub for extensive resource extraction, particularly of ivory and rubber, which bolstered the Belgian economy and filled the king's coffers. The colonial government utilized forced labor, brutality, and terror to assert control, resulting in widespread agony and demise among the native population. Historical records, including Roger Casement's report, detail the horrors inflicted by the Belgian administration, such as dismemberment, enslavement, and mass killings. The Congolese environment also suffered severe degradation due to the intense extraction activities. This historical backdrop is vital for comprehending the novella's depiction of moral decline and the corrupting effect of unrestrained power.

The River Between: Ngũgĩ's novel unfolds in colonial Kenya in the early 20th century, a time characterized by British colonization and the enforcement of Western education and cultural norms. The British colonial authorities aimed to reshape Kenyan society, frequently ignoring indigenous customs and property rights. The Gikuyu people, central to



Ngũgĩ's story, faced considerable cultural upheaval and displacement. Land alienation and the advent of Western schooling caused deep rifts within the community, with some adopting Western ideals while others fought to maintain their cultural identity. The novel reflects the intricate negotiations of identity and belonging amid colonial encroachment. The Mau Mau uprising, which happened subsequently, was a direct outcome of colonial subjugation, including land dispossession and cultural suppression, leading to violent resistance.

The historical context of *Heart of Darkness* is further enriched by Joseph Conrad's personal experiences as a steamboat captain in the Congo Free State. His direct observations of the harsh exploitation and violence under Leopold II's rule shaped his depiction of the moral decline and psychological disarray of the colonizers. This biographical aspect adds another layer of complexity to the text, emphasizing the author's own participation and critique of the imperial endeavor.

In the case of *The River Between*, the Mau Mau uprising, which took place after the novel's time frame, offers an important historical context for understanding the themes of resistance and cultural retention. Ngũgĩ's subsequent works, which directly address the Mau Mau struggle, illustrate the lasting effects of colonial oppression and the continuous pursuit of liberation. This broader historical context highlights the significance of cultural memory and the necessity of reclaiming indigenous narratives in the wake of colonial forgetfulness.

Race and Othering in Colonial Discourse

Heart of Darkness: Conrad's depiction of the Congolese individuals frequently faces criticism for its degrading and stereotypical portrayals. The story constructs the "other" as primitive, savage, and enigmatic, reinforcing the colonial divide of civilized Europeans against barbaric Africans. The imagery and language utilized support the formation of racial distinctions, representing the Congolese as a faceless collective rather than as distinct persons. Conrad's imagery, such as "bundles of acute angles" and "black shadows of disease and starvation," reinforces a view that dehumanizes the Congolese, stripping them of their humanity and agency.

The narrative's focus on Marlow's viewpoint fundamentally underscores the colonial perspective, adding to the sidelining of indigenous narratives.

The River Between: Ngũgĩ's work presents a counter-narrative to colonial portrayals, showcasing the Gĩkũyũ individuals as intricate and nuanced beings with rich cultural traditions. The narrative delves into the internal rifts within the community, revealing the varied responses to colonial pressures. Ngũgĩ's characters, like Waiyaki, exhibit a profound appreciation for their own culture, providing a stark contrast to the colonial image of indigenous people. Ngũgĩ incorporates Gĩkũyũ language and concepts throughout the story, underlining the significance of cultural specificity and affirming the legitimacy of indigenous wisdom. The characters' internal conflicts and discussions regarding cultural identity expose the intricate ways that colonial portrayals are absorbed and resisted. The focus on the Gĩkũyũ community's history, traditions, and spiritual beliefs counters the colonial narrative that depicts Africans as devoid of civilization or culture. The thorough depictions of Gĩkũyũ rituals, ceremonies, and social structures emphasize the richness and sophistication of indigenous existence, disputing the colonial portrayal of the "other" as simplistic or primitive.

Language, Power, and Hegemony in Both Texts

Heart of Darkness: Conrad's manipulation of language illustrates the power structures of colonialism, establishing a linguistic hierarchy that favors the colonizer's worldview. The narrative voice, articulated through Marlow, frequently utilizes ambiguous and metaphorical expressions, reflecting the moral complexity of the imperial endeavor. The language of the colonizers serves to justify and rationalize their actions, forming a hegemonic discourse that sidelines indigenous voices and viewpoints. The narrative's emphasis on Marlow's perspective inherently prioritizes the colonial point of view, leading to the suppression of native voices. The regular depictions of the "wilderness" as a domain of darkness and savagery exemplify how language constructs a narrative that supports colonial justification, reinforcing the dichotomy between civilized Europe and primitive Africa. Terms like "savages" and "primitive" further sustain the colonial hierarchy, depicting Europeans as superior and Africans as inferior. The novella's language often conceals the brutality and exploitation of colonialism, generating an impression of moral ambiguity that helps rationalize the actions of the colonizers.

The River Between: Ngũgĩ purposefully employs language to reclaim African autonomy and contest colonial dominance. The novel integrates Gĩkũyũ language and cultural allusions, affirming the significance of indigenous knowledge and traditions. By writing in English, Ngũgĩ also showcases how colonized authors can subvert and reshape the language of the colonizer, utilizing it as an instrument of resistance and self-expression. Ngũgĩ's emphasis on the power of oratory and storytelling within the Gĩkũyũ community underscores the value of indigenous forms of



communication, which are often marginalized or dismissed by colonial powers. The conflict between Joshua and Waiyaki regarding the merits of Western education versus Gikūyū traditions serves as a key example of how language is leveraged to negotiate cultural identity and affirm indigenous agency. Ngūgĩ employs language to vividly depict the Gikūyū landscape and cultural practices, immersing the reader in the indigenous experience and challenging the colonial propensity to erase or misrepresent African realities.

Conrad's language in *Heart of Darkness* reflects the power relations of colonialism, with English serving as the predominant language of the colonizers. The narrative's intricate and frequently ambiguous language amplifies the aura of mystery and otherness surrounding the African continent. Language usage emphasizes the colonizers' dominance over narrative and representation.

Ngūgĩ's *The River Between* examines the effects of colonial language policies on Gikuyu culture. The implementation of English education and the repression of Gikuyu language are illustrated as mechanisms of cultural subjugation. Ngūgĩ's choice to write in Gikuyu in his subsequent works highlights his dedication to reclaiming linguistic agency and challenging colonial supremacy. *The River Between*, composed in English, reveals the conflict between the two languages.

Literary Techniques and Genre Analysis

Heart of Darkness: Conrad utilizes a frame narrative, where Marlow recounts his tale to a group of listeners along the Thames, establishing a sense of distance and uncertainty. This narrative format reflects the psychological disorientation inherent in the imperial experience, emphasizing the challenges in grasping the moral and ethical quandaries of colonialism. The novella incorporates aspects of modernist literature, like symbolism, impressionism, and psychological realism, to express the subjective and fragmented essence of experience. The use of symbolic imagery, including the river and darkness, enhances the novella's investigation of moral and existential issues, generating a feeling of discomfort and ambiguity. The impressionistic approach, marked by its emphasis on sensory experiences and personal views, parallels the disorientation and confusion associated with the colonial experience. The psychological realism within the narrative explores the inner lives of characters, exposing the mental toll of imperialism on both the oppressors and the oppressed.

The River Between: Ngūgĩ's novel amalgamates features of realism and historical fiction, offering a detailed depiction of Gikūyū society during the colonial era. The story is told from a third-person omniscient viewpoint, providing an all-encompassing perspective of the community and its inner conflicts, while underscoring the varied reactions to colonial oversight.

Ngūgĩ employs vivid descriptions of the setting, cultural customs, and societal structures to fully engage the reader in the Gikūyū world, countering the colonial impulse to erase or misrepresent African realities.

Findings

Through an in-depth comparative study, this project unveils both commonalities and distinctions in how imperialism is narrativized and critiqued. Both Conrad and Ngūgĩ underscore the detrimental effects of colonialism on native cultures and individuals, yet their viewpoints and narrative techniques vary considerably. Conrad's work frequently illustrates the moral complexity and psychological disarray of the colonizers, while Ngūgĩ's novel prioritizes the experiences and agency of the colonized, presenting a counter-narrative that contests colonial portrayals. Both writers utilize language and storytelling to investigate the power dynamics inherent in colonialism, but Ngūgĩ's work actively reclaims and emphasizes indigenous narratives, affirming the significance of cultural continuity and resistance. The analysis reveals the contrasting representations of the "other" by these authors, with Conrad's narratives often bolstering colonial stereotypes and Ngūgĩ's work confronting them by reclaiming African agency and focusing on indigenous viewpoints. The literary methods and genre conventions adopted by each author contribute to their unique critiques of imperialism, with Conrad's modernist techniques evoking a sense of psychological disorientation and Ngūgĩ's combination of realism and historical fiction offering a vibrant depiction of Gikūyū society.

The historical and cultural contexts of each text significantly influence their narratives, with *Heart of Darkness* illustrating the brutal and exploitative Belgian colonialism in the Congo and *The River Between* responding to British colonialism in Kenya. Ultimately, both texts function as potent critiques of imperialism, providing essential insights into the lasting effects of colonialism and the ongoing fight for cultural identity and social justice.



Limitations

While this project provides a thorough comparative examination, it is essential to recognize its limitations. The focus on two particular texts limits the scope, potentially failing to encapsulate the diverse array of imperial stories and postcolonial reactions. The geographical focus is restricted to Belgian Congo and British Kenya, overlooking other colonial environments and their distinct dynamics. Literary analysis is inherently subjective; interpretations can differ based on the reader's cultural background and theoretical lens. The researcher's own biases and viewpoints may shape the analysis, and the interpretation of language, particularly metaphorical and symbolic language, can yield numerous meanings. The assessment of Ngũgĩ's work, which was originally written in Gikũyũ, is constrained by translation limitations, often resulting in the loss of cultural nuances and linguistic intricacies. Even in the examination of Conrad's writings, the evolution of time and cultural shifts complicate the precise understanding of certain terminology within a contemporary context. The project is also confined by the available historical and cultural data, where discrepancies in the historical narrative and biases in current scholarship might influence the analysis's accuracy.

III. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of *Heart of Darkness* and *The River Between* sheds light on the complex nature of imperial narratives and their lasting impacts. While both works tackle the themes of authority, "otherness," and cultural upheaval, they present unique viewpoints and storytelling techniques. Conrad's novella, through Marlow's voyage into the Congo's depths, exposes the psychological and moral decline inherent in colonial endeavors, emphasizing the corrupting nature of unchecked authority. Ngũgĩ's novel, grounded in the Gikũyũ experience, highlights the strength of indigenous traditions and the fight for self-determination, providing a counter-narrative that disputes colonial portrayals and affirms African agency. The analysis uncovers the differing ways in which these authors depict the "other," with Conrad's narrative often reinforcing colonial stereotypes while Ngũgĩ's narrative subverts them by reclaiming African agency and prioritizing indigenous viewpoints. The language and narrative styles also contrast significantly, with Conrad's vague and metaphorical expressions reflecting the moral ambiguities of imperialism, and Ngũgĩ's intentional use of language challenging colonial dominance and emphasizing the value of indigenous knowledge.

In closing, *Heart of Darkness* and *The River Between* provide invaluable perspectives on the intricacies of imperial discourse. Conrad's novella reveals the ethical corruption of European colonizers, while Ngũgĩ's work honors the strength of African communities and contests colonial stereotypes. The comparative study of these narratives emphasizes both shared and differing literary techniques utilized by the authors, delivering a nuanced comprehension of the persistent legacies of colonialism.

By exploring themes of race, language, and cultural identity, this project enhances our overarching understanding of the intricate nature of imperial power. The examination highlights the significance of historical and cultural contexts that influence literary narratives and underscores the continuing relevance of these works in today's discussions about colonialism and its effects.

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