

Abstract

The primary goal of this study is to provide a postcolonial interpretation of female characters in

The Colonial Image of Man-Woman Relationship in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

أ.د. باسم نشمي جلود الباحثة سارة أمين حسين

جامعة القادسية / كلية التربية

basim.neshmy@qu.edu.iq

Joseph Conrad's selected fiction. Joseph Conrad is one of the outstanding writers who has dedicated his literature to depict the prospects of social interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. The majority of Conrad's characters are male, whereas female characters in his novels as either random minor figures or submissive, passive creatures. The focus of this paper is on the female characters, both white and native, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. There is no doubt in Marlow's mind that women should focus on their responsibilities and avoid men's issues, for they should continue to be misled and oblivious to the injustices in this world. This is clear from how he talks about and treats white women throughout the novella. He believes that the safety of society can be ensured if women are isolated in their own private World.

المخلص

الهدف الأساسي من هذه الدراسة هو تقديم تفسير ما بعد الاستعمار للشخصيات النسائية في رواية جوزيف كونراد المختارة. جوزيف كونراد هو أحد الكتاب البارزين الذي كرس أدبه لتصوير آفاق التفاعل الاجتماعي بين المستعمر والمستعمر. غالبية شخصيات كونراد من الذكور ، في حين أن الشخصيات النسائية في رواياته إما كشخصيات ثانوية عشوائية أو كائنات خاضعة وسلبية. تركز هذه الورقة على الشخصيات النسائية ، سواء البيضاء أو الأصلية ، في قلب الظلام لكونراد. ليس هناك شك في ذهن مارلو بأن النساء يجب أن يركزن على مسؤولياتهن ويتجنبن قضايا الرجال ، لأنهن يجب أن يظلن مضللات وغافلات عن الظلم في هذا العالم. يتضح هذا من الطريقة التي يتحدث بها ويعامل النساء البيض في جميع أنحاء الرواية. هو يعتقد أنه يمكن ضمان سلامة المجتمع إذا تم عزل النساء في عالمهن الخاص .

Keywords: colonialism, postcolonialism, representation of women, subaltern, *Heart of Darkness*

Introduction

The descriptive meaning of the origin of 'colonialism' originally stemmed from '*colonia*', the Roman word that lexically indicates a 'farm' or a certain 'settlement'. This meaning was used to denote the Roman settlements in other lands. The meaning has come to cover the expansion of the nation's lands to other foreign countries and territories through the strategies of forcible occupation and control by using power. This phenomenon can be traced back to the fifteenth century when it was initially used in English. Later, during the late nineteenth century, the term developed through indicating various notions. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, colonialism is defined as:

A settlement in a new country . . . a body of people who settle in a new locality, forcing a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up. (Cited in Loomba 2015, 19)

Politicians and historians commonly use the term "postcolonialism" to describe the period following World War II as independence. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2002), every culture has been influenced by imperialism from the time of colonization until the present. This is due to the persistent concerns that have pervaded the historical process sparked by European colonial assault (2). Consequently, all cultural production that interacts in some way or another, with the continuing effects of colonial rule is considered post-colonial. Colonized communities engage in this process for an extended length of time through many stages and means of interaction with the colonizing power, both during and after the real time of direct colonial authority (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 195).

Many prominent critics helped in developing the postcolonial theory. The most prominent ones are Edward Said, Franz Fanon, and Gayatri Chokrabarty Spivak, who are famous for their significant contributions the

postcolonial theories and analysis. They exert great efforts to make up free voices from the colonial writer and the writers who belong to the colonizers. Their writings and ideas are influential in postcolonial analysis and perspectives (Innes 2007, 5).

Regarded as one of the most famous postcolonial theorists, Edward Said has recommended the keystone for the postcolonial theory. He has been considered one of the greatest critics and cultural theorists. His works focus on the dominance that Europe has over other regions. Obviously, his *Orientalism* (1978) is notably seen as the authority for the postcolonial theory; it has had a massive impact on many critics and writers. Said shows how Western scholars and writers looked at the East or the Orient.

Spivak is well known for introducing the concept of “subaltern,” which describes those lower in rank, particularly the officers under the rank of captain. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci first used the term in his *Prison Notebooks*; to describe classes subordinated by another social class representing political and economic control (Morton 2003, 48). In addition, this term is manifested by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1998) as denoting the inferior rank of the people under the ruling class. The term implicates the marginalized and oppressed people in the colonial and postcolonial periods (215).

Women of colour are described as fully marginalized and unable to express themselves freely, and they were crucially and harshly treated in their communities. Some postcolonial writers have represented them to some extent. This representation was not completed due to the condition of the male-dominant system. The male-centred condition has made the voices of women of colour unheard and unrecognized. This leads to women of colour losing their place in the postcolonial feminist theory (Bolat 2022, 3). The postcolonial period, however, was different concerning the treatment of women. They could have more vent and importance than the colonial period. This importance becomes clear at establishing the constitution endorsed after the dependence, where many items have come to support women's rights and security. Women started

to reserve equality and free voices. They started to have the lead in different fields.

African women were often represented in literary genres as the subordinating followers of male figures. Women were queen-mothers, queen-sisters, princesses, leaders and holders of offices and villages in pre-colonial Africa, occasional warriors, and, in one well-known example, the ultimate monarch, the Lovedu. Due to the fact that women had lost their social and political status in post-colonial Africa, they were not safe from some definite assaults. Many academics argue that African women have lost their voice and cannot achieve education and economic equality (Sudarkasa 1993, 91).

The postcolonial feminist theory is mainly concerned with the condition of women's representation in once-colonized countries. This theory aims at constructing gender differences in colonial and anticolonial discourses. The representation of women in colonial and anticolonial discourse is found particularly in the works and productions of women writers. Postcolonial feminist critics give rise to various conceptual, political, and methodological problems related to the study of gender representations (Tyagi 2014, 45).

The postcolonial feministic theory demonstrates pressure on the entire postcolonial mainstream in the constant reiteration of the issues of gender. There appeared a tense connection between postcolonial and feminism as the female critics remark that the postcolonial method is a male-centered theory that comes to segregate women as well as explain them. Feminism has accused the postcolonial theory of obliterating women's roles for independence and misrepresenting women in the national discourse, too (Tyagi 2014, 46). Postcolonial feminism is, therefore, regarded as a critique of the harmonious tendencies of Western feminism. The post-colonial feminism is different from Western feminism. A newly developed approach wishes to represent the typical problems of women in Third World nations. This movement is considered an initiative for the activities and academics that are fully or partly associated with

many colonized countries. They are determined to improve the status of women originally in postcolonial countries (Mishra 2013, 129).

The portrayal of women is changing with the passage of time. Women are considered subordinate to their men. African women are affected by both colonialism and patriarchal oppression, and it is the society that controls their behaviour. African women are often emerged as victims with a suppressed voice, unlike white Western women (Bolat 2022, 12). Postcolonial writings focus mainly on males, while women are ignored because the texts of the early writers were male works. The female characters and their suffering were rarely so prominent, and many critics point out that the patriarchal society is the main reason for this situation and the colonial process (Bolat 2015, 481).

On the level of literature, the novel in particular, women are depicted in various areas. Starting with the representation of women in Africa, which is the place of most depressive social rules, postcolonial writers focused specifically on black women. The man and the white colonizer determine the identity of black women (Bolat 2015, 478).

Women's Half-Presence in *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness has been extensively criticized from the postcolonial perspective, though it is Conrad's most famous work. Since its first publication in 1899, Conrad has taken on a variety of societal problems within the context of this work. One of these issues is the position of women. Although women have been portrayed in various novels, the status of women in this novella opens the door to a wide range of possible interpretations. The writer neglects women's issues and focuses on other topics such as imperialism, power, and the loss of the true self in light of the brutality of imperialism. The novella is a symbolic representation of two different types of darkness: the first is located in the heart of Africa, and the other in the heart of humanity.

Conrad reveals the essence of colonialism in the novella by suppressing native beliefs and traditional ways of life. Charlie Marlow is the main character and Conrad's spokesperson in the novella. Marlow's

trip up the Congo as a steamship leader for his agency, which openly declares to the community that they are travelling to Congo to civilize savage natives, portrays the actual savagery of colonialism. The Europeans attempted to convert the Congolese to European civilization (Azam 2014, 49-50).

The novella mentions colonizer and colonized women with marriage allusions, but no names are given to them. Women are considered the inferior gender. Their primary function was domestic; therefore, they were not seen as individuals with authority or influence. The male characters are represented by Marlow, the chief accountant, the general manager, and Kurtz. In contrast, the female characters are considered subordinate to the men, such as Kurtz's mistress, Kurtz's fiancée, and Marlow's aunt (Bakhsh and Hesari 2021, 114). Men consider women inferior to them (Anbaran 2016, 130). In the novella, Kurtz refers to the Intended as a subordinate to him when Marlow refers to Kurtz, "You should have heard the disinterred body of Mr. Kurtz saying, 'My Intended'" (Conrad 2005, 56). The possession of a woman by a man is mentioned in the novel several times, as in the case "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—' everything belonged to him" (Conrad 200, 57), and "my Intended, my station, my career, my ideas" (Conrad 2005, 80). Through this description, the novella shows men's possession and domination of women.

Women are seen from the point of view of men as uneducated and do not have the strength to face life. Marlowe's aunt, who is far from the truth, and Kurtz's fiancée, "Intended," lives in darkness as she is far from reality. Although she is beautiful and from a wealthy family, she continues to live in the dark for several years. She continues her attachment to Kurtz's shadow without knowing the truth about Kurtz (Xin 2018, 1055).

In Conrad's writing, two broad categories of female characters are those who speak and those who do not. Marlow's aunt and the Intended are examples of women who can be heard talking; in contrast, Kurtz's mistress and the women working at the Company's Brussels headquarters are examples of women who remain silent, serving as symbols of the "enigma of the jungle" (Agota and Eva 2006, 2).

Women are depicted as powerful weapons controlled by European men. This point of view has frequently been recurrent in feminist theories. Joseph Conrad represents this phenomenon in his novella via Marlow's aunt when she got a job for him to be employed in a Belgian trading company (Vyas and Gautam 2018, 585).

Marlow's aunt describes the ancient methods of living of the natives as "horrid." She thinks that the only system that needs to be followed is the European system. Marlow unintentionally agrees with his aunt since he thinks the Africans are "inhuman" when he listens to native screams behind a heavily forested wall (Conrad 2005, 42). Despite her complete ignorance of the horrible crimes done by white men in the Congo, she insists on convincing Marlow to accept a job as the leader of a river steamboat because she thinks that she is helping to advance a worthy cause and an excellent vision.

Marlow's aunt who is the only relative and the first female character to appear in the novella before Marlow goes on his journey to Africa. She is an ambitious woman who thinks Marlow can do anything and capable man who will bring Western beliefs and civilization to African society. Marlow asks her to help him find a job, and she decides to help Marlow, stating, "It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea" (Conrad 2005, 8).

She has an "enthusiastic soul," as Marlow says, which indicates that he is forced to use women because he wants to get a job, and without her help, Marlow cannot be on board. "Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me" (Conrad 2005, 8). In his work *Orientalism*, Edward Said states that "power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer" (Cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995, 41). Because of her position and her relationship with one of the dominant people, "with the wife of a very high personage in the Administration," Marlow's aunt uses her influence in Brussels to get Marlow to work in the company, and the wife of a personage respected her and agreed to give Marlow a job. Marlow ignores this important role of

his aunt due to the patriarchal society that Marlow lived in, which confirms that women can do crucial things; yet, they have been marginalized (Bakhsh and Hesari 2021, 115). According to Marlow and Conrad, the idea that a man needs a woman to get what he wants is embarrassing (Ali 2008, 2).

According to Marlow, women are too sensitive and fragile to handle the harsh realities of life. They should keep far away from the realm of men. Marlow's aunt represents a kind and compassionate woman, but she does not know how African people are treated. So she advises Marlow to wean "those ignorant millions from their horrid ways." She believes in imperialism's mission to develop and civilize the suffering savages. When Marlow joins the company, he finds it goes against what his aunt thinks. He shows that the company's mission is not to civilize and educate indigenous people and improve their living conditions, but to earn money and for their interests (Vyas and Gautam 2018, 586). This indicates the fact that women are naive and unaware of the real motifs behind imperialism.

Marlow refers to the two European women, his aunt, and Kurtz's fiancée, who are far from the truth. So they represent the condition of women as a cover for the world of men (Boruah and Chutia 2018, 1056). Throughout the novella, ladies are described as existing in a lovely world of their own. Conrad depicts women as palimpsests, ghosts, and half-presences.

Marlow's repeated persistence that women are "out of it" should warn us that women may be more significant in his tale than he acknowledges. Conrad not only portrays women as being "out of touch with the truth," rather, he builds the female in his story using a distinct discursive genre from the males in the novella. In contrast to Kurtz's "folds of gorgeous eloquence" (Conrad 2005, 86) and Marlow's superb narration of his companions' sailors, the women's narrative is limited. When women talk, they are misinterpreted, misled, or portrayed as lacking a thorough comprehension of events.

Although the novella lacks female characters, it is rich in discussing their position. Marlow's depiction of the many ladies in the novella is startlingly similar. They are unaware of the crimes happening in the Congo, which only Marlow knows. Marlow's aunt is "triumphant" with the activities of the ivory exporting company. When Marlow sees his aunt again towards the end of the novella, her role is restricted to becoming a comforter and caregiver, with no knowledge or discussion of what happened in the Congo. Very little information is provided on these ladies because female characters are merely there to assist the men with menial jobs and not to establish their independence.

No voices are given to the female characters in the novella. When Marlow states, "the Intended" murmured, "I had heard you were coming" (Conrad 2005, 87). Marlow asserts that her voice is meager when she says, "He died as he lived" (Conrad 2005, 91). Perhaps her low voice indicates that Marlow does not want her to affect the reader or that her voice cannot be heard easily because of her grief over the loss of Kurtz (Yildirim 2013, 105).

Marlow refers to the Intended that she is beautiful and has self-confidence. When Marlow observes her image:

She struck me as beautiful—I mean she had a beautiful expression. I know that the sunlight can be made to lie too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and pose could have conveyed the delicate shade of truthfulness upon those features. She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself. (Conrad 2005, 86)

When Marlow begins talking to her, he notices, "The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead" (Conrad 2005, 87-88). Then he notices "with every word spoken, the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (Conrad 2005, 89).

The intended's ignorance of the truth is similar to Marlow's aunt's ignorance of the company's reality. The Intended, like Marlow's aunt, represents Victorian English women in that her world is established on "the faith that was in her . . . that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness" (Conrad 2005, 89). The Intended is not aware of the "unsound methods" shown by Kurtz and his mistreatment of Africans. She meets Marlow, who can clearly see that she is ignorant of Kurtz's brutal acts towards Africans and his worldly actions in the inner station. She always refers to Kurtz as a wonderful man with a "generous mind," a "noble heart," and a "goodness [that] shone in every act" (Conrad 2005, 90).

Marlow does not tell the intended truth about Kurtz and the brutality of Kurtz in the Congo. The Intended asks Marlow about Kurtz's last words, and Marlow answers that her name is the last word that Kurtz said before his death. Marlow wants to preserve the imaginary world in which she lives (Guo 2011, 766).

Marlow may not want to destroy the genuine love, the Intended bears towards Kurtz, who exploited the indigenous people to satisfy his interests. So he does not tell her the truth, and he states that the Intended can easily be deceived because she does not doubt the words he tells her. Marlow refers to her, "she seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself" (Conrad 2005, 86). Her passion towards Kurtz makes her embrace Marlow's words without thinking about herself (Gadekar 2018, 17). Both Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's Intended are shown as victims of patriarchy and colonialism. As a result, they have suffered and sacrificed for a world that has ignored and dismissed them as mere objects.

Women do not travel in the novella, and Conrad does not allow them to understand colonial adventure, yet they are vital for sending off the men. Women are put in liminal spaces yet cannot cross the barriers between here and there. Marlow the women who have been involved in knitting black wool in front of the office; they have been linked to darkness, evil, and then foreboding to something, 'guarding the door of Darkness' when

he goes to the company. These women are voiceless and weak. The slim woman meets Marlow and guides him to the waiting room but does not speak with him. Marlow emphasizes that “she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room” (Conrad 2005, 10).

Marlow has to explore his way through the looks of these women to get to the company’s heart. At the same time, the women, who sat outside the company offices, also served as the entrance for Europeans to the conquered Congo. They seem unusually “unconcerned” and unconnected to Africa. The ladies weave wool for a cold environment, signifying their disinterest in the destiny of the men that pass them. One is fat, while the other is slim. Conrad’s novella considers women invisible. Despite the importance of the existence of these two women, he gives little importance to their presence. Marlow links his adventure to Africa with these two women; he believes that his life is related to the sewing threads they use and that his life does not continue but will be interrupted one day. Marlow speculates that the women weave “black wool as for a warm pall,” leading us to think that they are constructing palls for the dead person as they come from Africa to Europe (Behera 2022, 236).

In contrast to Marlow’s aunt, the two women greatly influence Marlow, as they are largely mysterious, and their appearances indicate that they know everything about the company but are indifferent. The fat woman seems like a witch because she possesses some of the characteristics of a witch, while the thin woman is active, and her role is represented by introducing people to the company (Bode1994, 24). Marlow states:

In the outer room, the two women knitted black wool feverishly. . . . The old one sat on her chair. . . . She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one

introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. Ave! Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant*. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way. (Conrad 2005, 11)

Women are represented by the painting at the Central Station. Kurtz created the sketch while on his way toward the Inner Station. The picture is a little oil drawing of a blindfolded woman carrying a lit candle. In this regard, Marlow describes the image: “Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was somber, almost black. The women’s movement was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister” (Conrad 2005, 28). The concept of justice lies behind this blindfolded woman. She is guilty because, despite carrying a torch of light, she fails to notice how cannibals are treated in Western Europe. This drawing represents Western beliefs (Patterson 2019, 3). The woman in the painting is mute; she decides to remain blind in support of what Kurtz has done and contributes to disseminating the false ideals of the Empire. She is unimpressed with European ideas’ effects and does not care about them (Patterson 2019, 4).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provides a significant question that she discusses in her article “can the subaltern speak?”. A subaltern is an individual or group of individuals who have been marginalized in society. They lack a voice and are marginalized due to assimilation and colonization. There is just one mute black woman within Outer Station. Ironically, the white dress the chief accountant wears is made by a docile, silent, colonized woman. Her chief accountant has prepared her for the position. However, she is under the chief accountant’s authority and has been turned into a slave. This behaviour illustrates the colonizers’ attitude and insincerity toward women, mainly colonized women. The head accountant argues that he is teaching her a few of the ideals and habits of the civilized colonizers (Ahmad 2019, 33).

Marlow does not mention the name of Kurtz's lover when he describes her; in addition, there are few African women in the novella. Marlow describes Kurtz's mistress as rebellious, controlling the natives and practising brutality on them because she does not want to leave Kurtz (Bakhsh and Hesari 2021, 114). She represents the ideology of colonialism, although she is one of the Africans. She has been regarded as both beautiful and brutal. She is considered voiceless, and her only power regenerates from her sexual characteristics. She is a symbol of a force. Her power comes from her appearance, not her educational or social qualities.

Furthermore, she represents a secondary role in the novella: she is a creature that can be seen but cannot be heard. She helps Kurtz to get what he wants. This is how Marlow describes her:

[F]rom right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. . . . She had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow. . . . innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent. (Conrad 2005, 71)

The native mistress walks by herself on the coast while men shoot weapons at the natives, and she has been characterized as a "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. . . . Savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent." In contrast to Marlow's aunt or the Fiancée, the native woman appears to have a dominant position within her society. In reality, despite her seeming significance, men view her as useless.

The beautiful body of the native mistress "mirrors" the body of Africa and its "dark" wildness that the colonizers are robbing as they search for their ivory hoards. Marlow and the men who come with him are allowed to

assist Kurtz, but the mistress is not allowed even to offer such assistance. The inferiority of the mistress in the Congo reflects the same position of Kurtz's fiancée in European civilization. Without males, women are powerless: "the barbarous and superb woman . . . stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the somber and glittering river" (Conrad 2005, 80). The Intended does the same: she "put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them back and with clasped pale hands. . . . resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness" (Conrad 2005, 90-91). Symbolically, this gesture of motion indicates the female's independence.

The representation of Kurtz's mistress and Kurtz's overall dominance over the indigenous are noteworthy. In essence, Conrad suggests that Kurtz's level of self-destruction does not represent civilization. Kurtz is aware of his boundless capacity for evil, yet that does not stop him from acting in that manner. The fact that Kurtz's mistress supports the notion that Europeans and Africans are similar in many ways is essential, as Conrad demonstrates. Despite the woman's look as a goddess, Kurtz and his mistress have a typical romance reminiscent of a standard Western male-female connection. Kurtz's mistress is akin to the European woman because she represents worth and money (Hills 2019, 23). According to the narrative, "she had brass leggings to her knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch men, that hung about her" (Conrad 2005, 71).

In Marlow's view, indigenous women were excluded from the discussions because of colonialism and patriarchy. He considers them as incomprehensible, odd, and mysterious. Racist attitudes about natives lead to white women speaking when women refer to men and repeating their thoughts. As a result, the speeches of white women are likewise ineffective in changing their situations. Men make them feel that their position is predetermined. Thus, these females accept and suffer their conditions while remaining mute; this is what Marlow means when he refers to Kurt's Intended: "she had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief,

for suffering” (Conrad 2005, 88). Accordingly, the racist, patriarchal perspective turns women into the silent victims of “otherness.”

Conclusion

The women in *Heart of Darkness* are not fully marginalized. They have some power and effects in their society. Marlow’s aunt is not marginalized, but she represents the Western perspective. Marlow would never have gotten his job on the African river ship without his aunt’s interference. His aunt is, in fact, partially responsible for creating his narrative. Also, Kurtz’s fiancé is not marginalized; she is western. The servant of the chief accountant is considered a savage woman; however, she is civilized by the white man. The mistress is savage but has a job, so she represents the Western perspective since she is idealized and faithful to Kurtz.

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