

## Subalternity in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

**Baskota Dhananjaya**  
English Department  
Damak Multiple Campus  
*Email-baskotadh@gmail.com*

### Abstract

Human civilization has a long history about power relation among the individuals and the societies. Power relations prominently try to 'other' them who are powerless, voiceless, socially backwards, culturally isolated and economically exploited. This paper presents how European elites make 'other' to the native Africans. The process of 'othering' establishes the idea of subalternity; which is reflected through the African natives in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. The native Africans are voiceless and put beyond the center of conversations among the non-African characters. The way of keeping Africans at bay is found in the novel; and they are made only slaves. This study tries to explore how subalternity is reflected in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Furthermore, this novel is viewed in this article from the subaltern perspectives proposed by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942), Ranajit Guha (1923-2023) using the qualitative research. The novel has reflected subalternity after the input of sources; and this is discussed for the objective conclusion.

**Keywords:** Binary opposition, dichotomy, orientalism, othering, projection, subalternity

### Introduction

Twenty-first century is pivoting over the inclusiveness of the people belonging to diverse social identities in the earth planet. Previously, such diverse identities were under the shade of hegemonism, i.e. Eurocentric knowledge. The way out of Eurocentric knowledge is paving number of measures to enter the world of unheard people, unseen people, unrecorded people, marginalized people, oppressed people, and the othered people. This othering is made by the dominance of hegemony over the voiceless people. There is a long human civilization history in which people are made other through the domination of hegemony, language, gender issues, racial issues, class

issues, and socio-political existence. 'I would say that Subaltern Studies arrived in the global mainstream in 1993, after Ranajit Guha's alignment with Bernard S. Cohn had made the project's cultural critique of colonialism an elixir of new vitality for American-style cultural history (Reading Subaltern Studies Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia DAVID LUDDEN).

The most striking way of othering voiceless people is examined through the 'subaltern' reading. It is the subcategory of combined Marxist and Postcolonial reading of the society. Subalterns are voiceless people, historically non-recorded people. 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented (Marx, 1972, 106).'

The word 'subaltern' is used first time by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to refer to the workers and peasants, the inferior in rank; but it gradually became a buzz word in the colonial and post-colonial studies. Asian critics like Ranajit Guha, Gyatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee adapted the idea of Gramsci to confront the official historical documents which entertains to silence the subalterns and promote elite voices or ruling class people. Spivak's essay 'Can Subaltern speak?' is the rhetorical question and its answer is 'They Can't Speak'.

The subaltern characters need to raise their voices in order to protest, confront advocating for victims' rights, equality, justice, and identity. But they cannot.

Subaltern studies are the result of globalization which promote to silence the afflicted people and create sophisticated elites. The last two decades of the twentieth century became the pageant of subaltern studies. The history of the subaltern classes was just as complex as the history of the dominant classes, elite classes, ruling classes although the history is just 'official' history; not the history of 'all' people. History is indifferent to the sacrifice and contribution made by the oppressed class people. History records the voice of the heroes recognized by the higher class of people. So, Jacques Derrida tried to deconstruct the 'Eurocentric knowledge' and favoured the 'othered' group in the society for consciousness and meaning construction process.

'Derrida calls the ethnocentrism of the European science.....is the symptom of the crisis of European consciousness (Spivak, 1988, p.295)'

Subaltern Studies is a name for the general attribute of making people subordinated class in society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, gender, race etc. attempting to allow the people to speak within the pages of elitist historiography to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of the truly oppressed, repressed, marginalised and made other. The literature which represents the powerless people, oppressed class, working class people, gender discriminated people, racial and cultural discriminated people, or the deprived class people is subaltern literature. Subalterns are the voiceless people, and the literature gives them voice, raises their voice is subaltern literature. Mulk Raj Anand,

Tony Morrison, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee etc. are the subaltern writers. 'Subaltern refers to the 'inferior in rank or status (Tyson, 2006, p. 425).' This means it is the literature of the marginalized people who have been overshadowed by the different elites, racial elites, indigenous elites, gender elites, political elites, geographical elites and cultural elites. The elites always try to keep and extend hegemony over weaker groups. As the result, the process of othering remains for long time in human society.

Joseph Conrad's renowned novel (novella) *Heart of Darkness* (1899), generally a 'sea journey novel', follows the journey of Marlow in Africa, portraying from Conrad's own time in the Congo in 1890. The narrative reflects on the inhuman realities of European colonialism, depicting disorder, devastation, and the oppression of Africans. It portrays the African people into power dynamics through language that the Africans are only slaves. The story explores the clash of European and African cultures, sparking reflections on comprehension and potential conflicts. The narrative strongly denounces imperialism, condemning cruelty and profit-driven western materialism. Marlow's narration plays a pivotal role in shaping readers' perceptions of events, reinforcing the narrative's stance against mistreatment and exploitation. Ultimately, *Heart of Darkness* encourages contemplation on cultural exchanges, personal growth, and the ethical ramifications of colonialism. The entire narrative is made by the narrators reflecting the African people from their own perception, and do not allow the natives to speak; nor their views are communicated.

Generally, Conrad explores diverse ways where integrity of the characters is threatened by the politics and economics corrupting the personal relationships. He tries to reconcile social and individual conflicts. Conrad's another novel, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) is about 'a necessary corruption of any kind of human society' (Daiches, 1998, p.1156). This novel, too, points out that society is necessary but corrupting. Daiches further conveys meaning of Conrad's all novels is that 'how material interests corrupt human behaviours and relations'. Economic and social exploitations seem to be the champions in Conrad's Novels. *Heart of Darkness* is more dimensional in this issue. 'Conrad is not protesting against anything, only illustrating a permanent aspect of human condition (Daiches, 1998, p. 1156)'. Such corruptions, exploitations, abusing power over the powerless people and process of othering is key issue of subaltern studies which is vividly found in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*.

### **Statement of the problem**

The process of othering has become a part of human civilization because of power relation maintained in the society. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Elite groups always strive to keep their dominance over the marginalized groups. Marlow's narratives stand for keeping Africans silent and put them beyond the center of

conversations. They are presented as nobody and used them as slaves. They are only exploited, abused. This article tries to explore the answer to these research questions:

- i. What is the position of characters in the novel?
- ii. Why are characters silent in the novel?
- iii. How does the novelist depict the 'other' characters?

### **Research objectives**

This article is focusing on the process of othering to native Africans and finding how they reflect the subaltern position obtained in this novel.

- i. To study the position and power relations of characters in the novel
- ii. To study how the characters are silenced by the elite or hegemony group
- iii. To study how the process othering is designed throughout the novel

### **Literature review**

The study of Africa has emerged a long discourse in the latter centuries. Chinua Achebe portrayed the 'image of Africa' with the violent criticism of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. It has a racist marked, which is the development of postcolonial theory, which critically addresses the legacies of colonialism (Clarke, 2017, p. 15). Achebe saw this novel through racist lens which repressed the African natives. This view developed the concept of imperialism and colonialism; and ultimately it based subaltern lens to read the novel. Mariwan Hasan et al (2021, p. 39) has presented insight about Conrad that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is since white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked made a detail studies over the *Heart of Darkness* with the focus on imperialism, colonialism and racism. The marginalization and exploitation of the voiceless Africans by the affluent Europeans are made key issues. This novel is the exploration of unpredictable human nature as well as the relevant matter of psychological and physical colonialism.

Several critics have observed Conrad's representation of the 'dark' continent and its people as very much a part of a marginalising tradition that has existed in Western literature for centuries. Most notably, The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (Clarke, 2017, p.11) accused Joseph Conrad having racism because he refused to see the black man as an individual in his own right, and because of his use of Africa as a setting—representative of darkness, savage, cannibal and evil. The oriental doctrine is present here that the Europeans are highly cultured and

intellect. This ideology has affected Joseph Conrad to be a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is since white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked (Achebe, 2006, p. 172)

G. Sankar (2016) under the title 'Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Joseph Conrad selected Novels: A Glimpse' focus on how native Africans are marginalised and repressed with the help of Europe's colonial power. ItsnainiBarorohMarfu'ah (2013) in his article entitled 'Colonialism and Racism Reflected in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* highlighting the European imperial power over the Africans because of race and color. The formation of white elite's dominance in conversation and identity has based subaltern discourses, which is the by-product of colonial doctrine.

The different readings of *Heart of Darkness* have not read as per project of othering to make the voiceless people subaltern, repressed, marginalised, exploited. The to meet this absence, this article preliminarily focuses on the project of othering in *Heart of Darkness*; which is the projection of subaltern reading; a byproduct of postcolonial reading of the text.

### **Methodology**

Entire human civilization is in affliction in different names. They are striving despite the adversities. The writers, poets and philosophers have immense impacts of human struggles, confrontations and voices, which reflects in their thoughts and creation. These confrontations are for the stabilization of power relation between the oppressor and oppressed. The modern criticism has accepted subalternity in texts; because it seeks the oppression of minority language speakers and analyses the text from their perspectives. 'In the post-colonial studies, subaltern identifies and describes the men, women, and the social groups who are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power (Sharma, 2078, p. 458)'.

Similarly, this article tries to examine Europeans- based characters as othering agents of the native Africans.'In the work of subaltern studies, it is necessary to reach up to not only the ideological part but also the livelihood of common people i.e. poor farmers, shepherds, workers, laborers, oppressed caste women. They are also human beings, they also think, take decisions, decide the way to live and grow in the society. The subaltern studies, therefore, defy those historians who regard people's action as external to their consciousness (Sahoo, 2014, p. 81)

These relative studies are essentially chosen for understanding of othering to make people subaltern in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This paper is preliminary based on

textual readings, both printed copies, and the e-resources. These readings generally promote to admit secondary data, as the source for the qualitative data. The enormous treasure of English literature, their critical studies are assimilated. Similarly, the narrator Marlowe examines the European based- characters and native Africans quite differently. So, narrator's point of view is given focus for evidence. The researchers and the writers, their interpretations and research works are accepted as resources.

The study has been conducted assimilating historical sources and used postcolonial approach to examine Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. To know if Conrad supports subalterns or he just showed how colonizers behaved badly with the poor people of Africa. Several writer's works have been consulted to support the ideas about the role Conrad had in showing voicelessness of African native people. Moreover, examples from the text are used to prove that fact that Africans have been made other, subaltern and they are treated as if they are not human being.

### **Findings and discussion**

#### **Otherringin subaltern projection**

Otherring process includes exposing and labelling differently individual or group of people in the identical society or group. The power holders or colonizers oppress members of indigenous culture fully quite unfairly and inhumanly. So, othering is position of human being which is subjugated by power. Such subjugated people are othering. This makes binary opposition as powerful / powerless. In the similar sense, Simone De Beauvoir entitled her one essay 'Woman as Other' in her book *The Second Sex*; as man / woman.

The *Heart of Darkness* creates very powerful binary opposition as Europeans / Africans, we / they, Whites / Blacks, civilized / savage, West / East. The narrator Marlowe observes in the journey that there is brutality in imperialism, and equally there is miserable condition of the native Africans as 'the standard of savagery' (Tyson, 2006, p. 428). The Europeans' motive to earn through ivory trade in Africa is clear and to achieve this mission they create dominance. The African natives are just the outsiders to follow white men's instructions; and they lose their identity, rights to choose and freedom. They are compelled to work. They suffer form the insufficient food, mistreatment, decline in health, lack of attention by the colonisers, and the natives think they are inferior to Europeans.

Marlowe delights when he sees a white man at the OuterStation, 'I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots' (Jago, 2011, p. 393); but he never excites seeing the native Africans. This is because, Marlowe thinks only European whites are sophisticated, civilised, advanced and intelligent. That is the reason, the Chief Accountant is a White. Marlowe uses

certain puns to describe African natives, such as 'black', 'eyeball glistening', 'bodies streamed with perspiration', 'faces like grotesque mask', 'black and naked', 'savage, backward and undeveloped' etc. in order to symbolize them as 'other' and the white Europeans embody as 'self'. Marlowe observes native Africans:

I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men — men, I tell you(p.381).

The process of othering African natives by the European traders builds the process of subalterning them. This process builds an identity; as subordinator, proletariat, inferior, junior, ruled, aborigine by the roles they obtain in society. Hegemony, elite and bourgeoisie class try to stabilize, protect or even enhance their dominance through language and behaviour. Most of the time the narrator speaks and sees the native Africans through his eyes. He never allows to speak to them. What the natives intend he does not know, but he knows what he knows through the elite's eyes. That's why Gayatri Spivak explores the universal rhetorical question 'Can the subaltern speak?'. Its universal answer is 'No'. Same substance occurs in the *Heart of Darkness*. Marlowe, the narrator never interacts with the native Africans, but he only observes through his eyes because the subalterns are the 'subject to others'. Marlowe observes the native Africans: A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants(p.380).

### **Voicelessness in subaltern projection**

The Voicelessness of the black subalterns is so vivid in this novel. Marlowe speaks Kurtz's intended woman, as she is white and he shares Kurtz's feelings to her openly, even with 'white lie'; because she is from elite class, i.e. white. But Marlowe never speaks with Kurtz's black mistress, nor she can speak with Marlowe. She loses her love, but her affliction remains unspoken and unheard. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak considered as one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals, said, 'Subaltern is not just a classy word for 'oppressed', for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting any opportunities. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (Spivak, 1988, p.309)'. Basing the words of Spivak, subalterns (African natives) are made weak, thrown away from the mainstream; even in the communication made by European elites. That might be the cause that Marlowe has obtained power, and he uses this intellectual power just because he is colonial exploiter who is capable to subjugate local people. He says:

They were nothing earthly now, — nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. (p.382)

The subalterns can speak in their own way with own tongue and accent, but they have problem to speak colonisers' standard English. Their voice is but within them. When the natives seemed to be cannibal and hungry, a nigger says, 'catch 'im. Give 'im to us' (p.404). This is because the subalterns cannot speak openly, accurately, fluently and grammatically. Rather they seek appreciation from the elites. The natives are portrayed as dirty and civilized. This creates binary oppositions between Europeans and the Africans that 'Africans are presented as subordinator' and unvoiced or, muted. The absence of dialogue between Marlowe and other Europeans with the native Africans proves the rhetorical question 'Can the subaltern Speak?'

This novel, on the way to subaltern study, creates 'eurocentrism'; which means projects the ideal position of European ideas and culture. Lois Tyson (2006, p. 421) writes, '.. the use of European culture as the standard to which all the other cultures are negatively contrasted - is called Eurocentrism.' *Heart of Darkness* reflects eurocentrism, a part of subaltern studies. This ideology is reflected in Marlowe's this comment:

There it is before you — smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out. (p.378)

### **Orientalism in subaltern projection**

*Heart of Darkness* projects the ideology of subaltern with the support of the ideology of orientalism. Orientalism, coined this term by Edward Said, is the Eastern World that includes Middle East, Near East and Far East (territory of Asia and North Africa) which the Europeans defined them as primitive, savage, uncivilized and non- intellectual. This novel reflects native Africans (Orientals) characterized by these negative attributes with lack of education, poverty, primitive, savage, slave and uncivilized. They are dehumanized, and voiceless. The native Africans are not allowed to speak openly with Marlowe, rather they are represented and narrated about them by Marlowe. Marlowe gives every details of the native Africans without communicating with them. He speaks as per his impression and visualization about them. He evaluates a native woman in this way:

She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. (p.416)

Marlowe portrays the native Africans who are working with them that they are cannibals, and they are hungry now. But they do not attack the white people; rather want to get the dead body. This creates a wonderful dichotomy between the River Thames and the Congo River to create as light / dark binary oppositions. That is the reason how the Europeans made the native Africans voiceless and created dominance over them thinking that they are superior, intellect, civilized, cultured, and belonging



to the elite class. Such assumption helps to invade and stabilize dominance over the inhabitants. Marlowe cruelly describes the native people as Satan:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair (p.377).

### **Racism in subaltern projection**

*Heart of Darkness* has very strong projection of racism which creates subaltern class of people. In this novel, subaltern are niggers, they are blacks, they are foolish and immoral. They are projects as animals losing the status of human being; and having no identity of their own, nor they have any purpose and ambition for future. They are nameless slaves, physically and spiritually sick, and victims. They tolerate the oppression of colonizers' exploitation, and they need to raise voice.

Racism pervades in all sectors of society; politics, economics, culture, art etc. and this ideology just discriminates people as per physical complexion and biological differences. This exercises exclusion and oppression to extract treasures from them; as in *Heart of Darkness*, to extract ivory from the native Africans. In the beginning of the novel, Marlowe observes the black are savage and barbaric to murder anyone. He has almost negative puns while referring the native Africans.

*Heart of Darkness* is perceived through the eyes of a European; and so, Marlow displays his racial attitude towards Kurtz's black mistress by saying, 'She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress' (p.415). Here Conrad projects the prejudice of the European people against the black Africans that they are savage and dangerous looking.

Marlow notices that she wears 'barbarous ornaments . . . her hair was done in the shape of a helmet, she had brass leggings to the knees' (p.416). This prejudice reflects both racial and gender biasness; and tries to create positive impression about the 'self.'

### **Conclusion**

Subalternity is a form of assigning people only subordinating role and status, and it turns into an umbrella concept which extends the scope of research from various subaltern perspectives judging how much they are made voiceless. In Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, there are different projections to make the native Africans subaltern. They are the process of othering, ideals of orientalism and racism. So, Spivak warns in such a situation of accommodating the condition of an enduring subordination. She declares that the undertaking of an intellectual is to headway for the subaltern groups and let them freely speak for themselves. But the European ivory traders establish themselves as imperials and colonizers and exercise power over the marginalized native Africans either suppressing them or ignoring their status as human

being and keep on exploiting them. Despite being made 'other', the native Africans cannot voice against injustice, psychological and physical torture. The readers feel pity on these subaltern native people; and may be, Conrad wants to make the voice of subalterns raised by the readers so that they could regain their previous status and respects. The dichotomy white / black, West / East, colonisers / colonised, civilised / savage can be broken, or goes reverse. Such reversing projection is advocated by the post-modernism, and it has brought a lot of changes in the people's life breaking the 'Eurocentric knowledge'.

The changes happening in a globalized post-modern world defines the subaltern as a separate class. The Subaltern School has contributed a lot in the study of history, economics and social sciences in Third World countries during end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of twenty - first century. It shapes a part of postcolonial theory in literature and its application is certainly functional in the study of certain texts; for example – Dalit Literature in our context.

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