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## **The Presence in Absence: A Lacanian Interpretation of *Heart of Darkness***

**Jennifer Monteiro**

### **ABSTRACT:**

*The paper is a close reading of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. It is an attempt to analyse the text through Lacan's theory of Psychoanalysis, exploring the various journeys made in the novel. The paper proposes a Lacanian model of study as it appears in the "Introduction" to his Seminar on "The Purloined Letter". More conventionally *The Heart of Darkness* is read as a post-colonial text but this paper attempts to mathematically deduces relationships among myriad characters and aspects of the novel to get near the notion of the 'Real' as coined by Lacan.*

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Mistah Kurz - he dead.

A penny for the Guy! ...

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow...

*The Hollow Men* by T.S. Eliot

Marlow had conceived of Kurtz what he in reality did not find him to be. Between the ambiguity of conception and reality of the persona of Kurtz, falls a shadow and it can be identified with an irretrievably lost object.

In the "Introduction" to his *Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"*, Lacan said that Freud in his research on the problem of "repetition" had conceived of a system 'psi' as it later turned out to be a predecessor of the 'unconscious'. This system was formed in an attempt to "refinding an object that has been fundamentally lost." (Lacan 34) Freud's solution to the problem in which some of his patients mechanically repeated some of their unpleasant experiences, went beyond his concept of the 'pleasure-principle' also known as the 'death instinct'. Hence Lacan, who had postulated the 'unconscious' as the cure, understood the 'unconscious' as structured like a language as is explained below "...it is the whole structure of language that psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious. This is to alert the prejudiced minds from the outset that the idea that the unconscious is merely a seat of the instincts may have to be reconsidered" (Lacan 413). The process of "repetition automatism" occurs in the form of symbols through which the presence in absence is attained. Lacan perceived of the "order of the symbol" not as constituted by man but man being constituted of it. *Heart of Darkness* has a strong potential for the study of the symbols through which multiple

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interpretations can be deduced and therefore establish the notion of the constant deferral of meaning. Every signification according to Lacan thus “can be sustained except by reference to another signification.”(Lacan 415)

In *Heart of Darkness*, we find the riveting mystery of the presence in absence of that with which the novel begins its daunting journey. It is interesting to note that although the journey commences with the omniscient narrator of Conrad, it gradually envelops the other characters of the novel, such as Marlow, Kurtz and even the readers. This journey in the novel is symbolic in nature since it also alludes to the inward journeys made; but it could get attributed as the “inconclusive experiences” (Conrad 20) like that of Marlow’s. In such a case, the quest of the journeys made can be read in the Lacanian sense of the ‘real’ which is thought to be the impossible, since the novel ends without any definite solution or meaning to the final words of Kurtz – “The horror! The horror!”(Conrad 105) The title itself can be interpreted in at least two different ways, as is analysed in James Guetti’s *The Limits of Metaphor*, where the first implies that even the wilderness has a heart but it may also imply that the real darkness is in the heart and that the novel initiates us into the journey from the known to the unknown. This ultimate darkness could be that space where all meaning collapses; hence, it can be speculated to be the ideal state or the ‘real’ of Lacan.

In language, Lacan acknowledges that there is a name for the signifying function and he refers to the figures of ‘metonymy’ and ‘metaphor’ which had earlier been defined differently by Freud, along the axis of combination and the axis of selection as ‘displacement’ and ‘condensation’ respectively. The omniscient narrator describes Marlow as the only one who “followed the sea” (Conrad 17) as he uses the metaphor of a mistress for the sea, when he says: “...for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it is the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as destiny.” (Conrad 18) And later it is Marlow who narrates: “...blank space of delightful mystery...a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar

over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land....The snake had charmed me.”  
(Conrad 21)

These lines conjure up the idea of the sea as the feminine. However, Marlow desires and therefore imagines this feminine force as a ‘snake uncoiled’, therefore rendering it a symbol of the phallus. Since it is the lack which is emphasized, a desire to conquer the ‘other’ is disclosed. Lacan defines it as, “It is thus that erectile organ- not as itself, or even as an image, but as a part that is missing in the desired image- comes to symbolize the place of *jouissance*.”  
(Lacan 697)

However, in Lacan’s formulation “the unconscious is the discourse about the Other” (Lacan 689). It is his conclusion that in the final analysis, it becomes important for the loser to survive in order to become a slave of the subject but a little further he admits that the subject always remains subjected to the Other, so that a power of absolute condition is maintained, where ‘absolute’ implies ‘detachment’. It is only through this means that the subject will succeed in oppressing the Other, just as the unconscious in human beings is unknown and repressed. At this juncture it becomes essential to quote Lacan in one of his philosophical understandings of the struggle in the relationship between the subject and its ‘Other’, “We need to know which death, the one that life brings or the one that brings life. (Lacan 686)

Therefore Kurtz for Marlow and the readers remains an “insoluble problem” (Conrad 81) and we fail to recognise the Other but this also enables within each of us an initiation of an inward journey, guided by the author through Marlow. “The signifier reflects its light into the darkness of incomplete signification” (Lacan 417). By this, Lacan perhaps tries to explain that no signifier has a definite meaning and that the primordial method of signification as postulated by Saussure, of the signifier and the signified as distinct orders, separated by a bar (S/s) is resisted. Thus, every signified is a signifier for another signifier as demonstrated by a lexicon, leading to the formation of the ‘signifying chain’ from which develops the concept of the ‘pure signifier’ which is completely independent of its signified.

*Heart of Darkness* through its narrative technique and its multiple narrators attempts to get closer to the meaning of the ‘real’. This experience of journeying towards it is well

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articulated in the lines of Marlow, when he says, “The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling.” (Lacan 61) The sometimes interjecting and intersecting narrations by the different narrators can be seen as the means of getting closer to the truth that each of the characters in the novel are pursuing by inadvertently exploring their ‘unconscious’, which eventually emerges as the site for the ‘desire’ to be born in them. They are all in search of that irretrievably lost object. The presence of myriad quests for the truth that each character in the novel proposes, like for Kurtz at a given time it was ivory and for Marlow it was Kurtz, we understand that there is not a particular signifier which is present in the novel. For every person, be it any character in *Heart of Darkness* or its author or its readers, the meaning of the ‘lost object’ varies and constantly keeps changing as well. The dialectics of the deferring significations of the lost object with respect to their subjects can be comprehended through the notion of ‘intersubjectivity’ as theorised by Lacan in his *Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”*. Lacan analysed the much discussed Poe’s short story *The Purloined Letter* by stating that the development of the story was neither be shaped by the characters in the story nor by the content of the letter but it was the position of the letter in relation to the three characters in each episode that was significant. The letter then played the role of the signifier by producing subject positions for the King, the Queen, the Minister, the Prefect, Dupin, and Lacan in the narrative. Its function is not only independent of its content but also does not depend upon its subjects who are in search of it. The letter therefore becomes akin to a ‘pure signifier’ which does belong to either the sender or the addressee.

Lacan reads *The Purloined Letter*, as the essentials of the pattern that gets repeated in the interplay between the three subjective positions that are in search of the lost object addressed as a pure signifier in the form of the ‘Letter’. If we construct this interplay in the construct of a triangle, in which the top-most vertex can be denoted to one subject who “sees nothing” (Lacan and Mehlman 44) hence is ‘blind’ to the situation that he/she finds himself in. The second vertex can refer to the second subject who can “see that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides” (Lacan and Mehlman 44) which implies that

he/she incorrectly believes that he/she cannot be 'seen' in turn, since he/she is aware of the first subject's incapability of seeing the lost object. A third subject belongs to the last vertex and he is in a position from where he is able to 'see' the first two subjects "leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it" (Lacan and Mehlman 44). This pattern of the three subject positions may distantly correspond to what Freud meant by the "Super-Ego", the "Ego" and the "Id" respectively. As the story proceeds we realise that different members of the cast characters occupy the space of the three subject positions. My attempt will be to show a similar pattern in the novel *Heart of Darkness*, as the different characters almost engage themselves in a relay by entering, associating, replacing and exiting the three subject positions in their search of their respective lost objects which due to the 'intersubjective module' is translated into a 'pure signifier' as the text progresses. Its place is constantly determined by the symbolic system within which it is incessantly dis-placed. One may speak of the 'place' of this signifier as the presence in its absence. Lacan says:

This is what happens in the repetition automatism... it is not only the subject but subjects grasped in their intersubjectivity, who line up ... it is that the displacement of signifier determines the subject in their acts of blindness, in their end and in their fate, their innate gifts... without regard for character or sex, and that, willingly or not, everything that might be considered the stuff of psychology... will follow the path of the signifier. (Lacan and Mehlman 44)

To adhere to what I have earlier committed, of reading *Heart of Darkness* in the similar pattern referring to the notion of 'intersubjectivity' as has been applied to the short story *The Purloined Letter* by Lacan, let me commence by proposing four episodes that would pertain to the mechanics of 'repetition automatism'.

In the first and foremost triangle, my objective would be to entrust the first position of the one who can 'sees nothing' to the Reader, the second to the author – Joseph Conrad, who believes that he cannot be seen and is aware of the subject in the first position to be 'blind' and the third to the omniscient narrator, who is ready to capitalise on the thing that has been left exposed for him to seize upon, which is the narration of the Text. Here the signifier that they all

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are in subject relation with is the Text. Conrad who is the author of the Text, realises that every reader is 'blind' in regard to the content of the Text unless he initiates him/herself into the reading of the novel, but what Conrad is not aware of is that the character of the omniscient narrator that he has created has actually seized from him the opportunity of narration, which is evident from the very first line of the text. The omniscient narrator clearly is loyal to the name denoted to him by remaining omniscient to the other two subjects in this structural analysis. The author, however, loses his authority over the text once he begins the act of writing. There is always a gap which is present, which can be paralleled with the 'shadow' which falls between conception and creation. It then becomes the text of every 'reader' who manifests his/her own meaning to the Text, instantly leading to the impression of the 'death of the author'.

The second triangle represents Kurtz as the object around whom there are three subject positions, of which the first is occupied by the omniscient narrator who has now drifted to the background as Marlow has taken up the onus of narrating the story. The position from where the subject thinks that he cannot be "seen" as he is aware of the omniscient narrator's ignorance on the object of the elusive figure of Kurtz. However, it is the Reader who has now taken the third subject position who witnesses the conversation that is taking place between both Marlow and the omniscient narrator and realises that Marlow "had a pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower – 'Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this...something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...'" (Conrad 20) This stature of Marlow implies that he was pronouncing his superiority over his mates on board the *Nellie* in order to hide his partial understanding of the elusive figure of Kurtz- the search of the enigmatic object which had lead him with an evident effort of intrepidity to the inner station. Thus the Reader is able to see the gap that was present, which Marlow believes is not visible and leaves it exposed for it to be seized.

The third episode entails the three subject positions around the object signifier of Ivory. The first position is occupied by the Manager who is not able to 'see' the connotations that Ivory carries. The second position is meant for Kurtz who exploits the symbol of Ivory to his

advantage because of which he becomes a strong contender in the race of becoming the Manager of the central station as well as winning the admiration and loyalties of the Natives. However, Marlow who learns about Kurtz from different people namely the Manager, the Russian and others, he is thus able to make almost correct conjectures about Kurtz as a person who is both known as a 'universal genius' and a 'hollow man'. Marlow along with the Readers understands that the annexation of huge amounts of ivory was important for Kurtz because he "had been driven by necessity to the Congo and away from everything he held dear. Surely it illustrates an extreme sense of pain and disappointment...The chief single deflection for Kurtz was undoubtedly the engrossing search for ivory, a job at which he proved an enormous success." (Bloom 95)

Finally in the fourth triangle, it is the letters of Kurtz that take up the significance in the constant deferral of meaning that constitutes the 'signifying chain'. Even here like in *The Purloined Letter*, Conrad does not disclose the contents of the Letters. The first subject position that relates to this object is Kurtz's intended including some of his relatives. None of them are able to present an intimate picture of him as much as Marlow can. They all knew the illusion that Kurtz was. Marlow the present possessor of Kurtz's private Letters begins to believe that nobody should be told the last words that Kurtz uttered because he believes that nobody really knows him as much as he does but this conviction is prone to be challenged since the Reader which yet returns to the third subject position can closely detect both Kurtz and Marlow as characters in the text and is competent to comment more if not as much as Marlow can on Kurtz.

The process of 'repetition automatism' is applied to the novel through the working of the four triangles in which the signified- Text in the first triangle becomes a signifier to the signified- Kurtz in triangle two which further becomes a signifier to the signified- ivory in triangle three and which finally becomes a signifier for the signified- the Letters in the fourth triangle. Thus, a signifying chain is formed from which evolves the notion of the 'pure signifier'. It is through this process that we attempt to reach the space of the 'real' in text. *Heart of Darkness* really ends like 'The Horror' of incomplete knowledge that is characteristic of those



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‘inconclusive experiences’ of Marlow since it ends with a lie. The darkness does not let itself be illumined. The mystery is never ravished. Lacan was of the opinion that, “while the letter may be *en souffrance*, they are the ones who shall suffer from it. By passing beneath its shadow, they become its reflection. By coming into the letter’s possession...its meaning posses them.” (Lacan 21)

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### **About the Author:**

**Jennifer Monteiro** is teaching as an Assistant Professor in English at Jesus and Mary College, Delhi University. Alongside Ms. Monteiro is pursuing PhD in English from Jamia Milia Islamia, Delhi. Her areas of Research interest are Gender Studies and Indian Theatre.