

Joseph Conrad and His Ecocritical Discourse in *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract: *Ecocriticism as a more recently evolved critical tool investigates into the derogatory attitude that man has been harbouring towards Nature throughout history. The western philosophical discourse decreed by philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and the likes has been instrumental in such 'otherization of Nature'—a tenet that was carried to its anticipated maxims by Enlightenment pioneers like Francis Bacon who kept man at the centre of the universe and Nature at the periphery. Joseph Conrad's ecocritical discourse in his magnum opus Heart of Darkness while exposing the derogatory attitude towards Nature by the colonial explorers, brings out the coveted undertone of the western philosophical discourses imbued in Conrad's writing. The article thus examines how Conrad exposes the hypocritical nature of the colonial enterprise that devalued and exploited Nature and propagated the domination of man over nature.*

Key Words: Ecocriticism, colonialism, discourse, imperialism, man-Nature dialectics

In today's modern world, Nature has become more a silent presence than a dynamic process which can be amply ratified from the comments of famous ecocritic Christopher Manes that Nature has grown quiet in our discourse, shifting "from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object" (17). The exclusive human domination over Nature has robbed it from its intrinsic value and has made it what critic Georg Lukacs would appropriately call "a societal category" (234). It does not need mentioning that such a utilitarian perception of Nature is predominant in the annals of the Western philosophical tradition decreed by philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and scientists like Bacon, Descartes and Newton. Relegated into the doldrums of quietude and stagnation in the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical paradigm, Nature has become only a reticent stage for the enactment of the human activities. In the Baconian, Cartesian and Newtonian scientific parlance, on the other hand, Nature is mere dead matter without any animistic vigour. In their anthropocentric weltanschauung, it has become a vulnerable site where the cultural dictums, anthropocentric imperatives and humanistic motifs of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism are superimposed. As an untoward victim of such a domination of anthropocentricity, Nature has lost its voice and vitality in the cultural terrain of modern man. In such a scenario, Ecocriticism, as a critical practice, explores the causative history of this regrettable silence of Nature. Aiming at a thorough exposition of the intricate mechanism of the "otherisation" of Nature by man, Ecocriticism sets the stage for digging into the downside of Western Philosophy that unscrupulously sanctions the denigration of Nature as a lifeless entity.

Joseph Conrad's colonial fiction, by virtue of its unremitting engagement with the man-Nature dialectics, can be studied in the light of such an ecocritical approach towards the characteristic Western dehumanisation of Nature. In Conrad's colonial narrative, we frequently trace the reiteration of the anti-Nature tenets of Western philosophy through the coloniser's perception of the same as a mute entity. More particularly, Conrad's magnum opus *Heart of Darkness* continues to remain a classic case of the above issue. Through its vivid rendering of the idiosyncratic derision of Nature by the colonial explorer, *Heart of Darkness* becomes a prospective site for ecocritical critical intervention. Based on these precepts, this article endeavours to explore, with reference to the above novel of Conrad, the Western man's conception of Nature as a dumb, dispirited and vapid entity.

Tellingly narrating the story of the Westerner's colonial venture into the dark heart of Africa, *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's magnum opus, registers the story of the encounter between the conceited Western man and his antithetical "other," i.e., Nature. Conceiving it as a dull, dispirited, unresponsive "other," the frame-narrator describes: "In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint . . . with gleams of vanished spirits. . . . The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom . . . (Conrad, *Heart* 1). Depicted in a gloomy colour, the natural vista in Gravesend, with its "gleams of vanished spirits," remains no more than an imaginary canvas of stagnation. Corroborating the ongoing dehumanisation of Nature, Marlow's description that the air over London is "condensed into a mournful gloom" is amply suggestive of the typical

anthropocentric tenet of robbing Nature of spirit and agility making it a stark embodiment of spiritlessness. Manifested through the biased and distorted human interpretation, Nature loses its animistic life-form in the colonial scheme of things and becomes thoroughly devoided, in sharp contrast to the animistic cultures where it is inspirited and articulate. In the above description of Nature as a dispirited entity, there is a succinct reverberation of the mind/body dualism of Descartes where he considers Nature to be devoid of all the qualities of mind (that is attributed to man only) and considers the same as a mere lifeless body (which, according to Descartes, is only a mechanical extension of the mind). He construes: "There exist no occult forces in stones or plants. There are no amazing or marvelous sympathies or antipathies, in fact there exists nothing in the whole of Nature which cannot be explained in terms of purely corporeal causes totally devoid of mind and thought" (qtd. in Plumwood 104).

Exposing such a typical disparagement of Nature to be an archetypal Western philosophical praxis, Ecocriticism hits at its bedrocks. The obvious ecocritical vantage point in such a scenario becomes the conceptualisation of Nature through the "machine metaphor" as propounded by Descartes. In a notorious protestation of Nature's inertness, Descartes, the ideological forbearer of its death, foregrounds the spirit of the human domination over it by seeing it as a 'machine' that is passive and can be easily moulded, controlled and overpowered by man with the knowledge of its operation. Viewed through the prism of such scientific materialism, Nature is seen as a dead machine lacking the vitality of life. It is nullified as being non-agentic, passive, non-creative, and inert. Conceived as mere matter, it is thought to be devoid of any characteristics of mind and thought. Seen as an entity that lacks goals and purposes of its own, Nature is gestated as a non-teleological and non-conative vacuum and hence, is thought to be given a "telos by human action" (Scott 14). Hence, men are to fill the empty space of Nature with their own intentionalities—an act that finally leads to what Timothy Oakes calls "spatial colonization" (509). Recognising the threat of the imposition of the human "telos" onto Nature, Conrad himself, in his autobiographical treatise *The Mirror of the Sea: Memoirs and Impressions*, admits: ". . . it is, after all, the human voice that stamps the mark of human consciousness upon the character of Nature" (79). Thus mechanistically conceived, Nature becomes a site where human purposes are superimposed. In the Cartesian solipsism therefore, the whole cosmos emerges as a meaningless assemblage of dead matter that has to be controlled by the god-like man just as mind controls the actions of the body.

Not only the Cartesian dualism, but also the Newtonian atomistic cosmology contributes to the culmination of a mechanistic world-view of

Nature. In the era of pre-scientific thought, Nature had been opulently endowed with attributes of spirit and agency. The Newtonian mechanistic scheme of things, however, has made it an insidious principle that Nature consists of insensate, drab matters devoid of interests and purposes. In the Newtonian atomism, Nature consists of dead matters in motion that can be regulated through the application of external force (by man). Understandably, such a mechanistic worldview propagated by Newton led towards the draining off of spirit from Nature leading towards its concomitant denigration. Ecocritic Freya Mathews convincingly explains the mortifying consequences of Newtonian atomistic cosmology in the following lines:

The blindness and deadness, the 'bruteness' of matter in the mechanistic scheme of things, robs us of our respect for Nature. . . . From the mechanistic point of view . . . Nature consists of matter, and matter is insensate, dead, drab, unvarying, devoid of interests and purposes. This draining-off of spirit from matter was naturally expressed in mind-matter dualism: the human mind had to become the repository of spirit since Nature had become the arena of blind matter in motion. Dualism gave expression to the mechanistic idea that matter was essentially utterly unlike ourselves: we are essentially identified with spirit, and matter was conceived as in every respect antithetical to spirit. As such—as the insensate, brute and blind, the inert and formless, the non-self, the Other, the External—matter of course ceased to be an object of moral concern or interest. (31-2)

An embittered Mathews, hence, is fairly justified to denounce the enlightened modern man who has made Nature nothing more than a "dark Newtonian abyss" (38). Endorsing the silence and spiritlessness of Nature, Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness*, makes use of expressions like "empty land" (Conrad 21), "mournful stillness of the groove," (Conrad 17), "an empty stream" (Conrad 39) and "the silence of the land" (Conrad 29) to proclaim what Caroline Merchant would call "the death of Nature" (1).

Seeing Nature as a mute object ready for being invaded by the colonisers, Marlow continues: "And outside, the silent wilderness [was] waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (Conrad, *Heart* 26). Evidently enough, Nature, as a mute and helpless entity, waits

patiently to be conquered, overpowered and finally possessed by this “fantastic invasion” by the intruding colonisers. As a “passive object of imperial commerce” (McCarthy 620), this non-human “other” (i.e., Nature) remains no more than a mere instrument for the colonial man’s materialistic and commercial exploitation. Accentuating further the muteness of the silent wilderness of the African Jungle, Marlow describes:

The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forest was before my eyes. . . . The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver—over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation . . . , over the great river . . . [that] flowed broadly by without a murmur. All this was great, expectant, mute. . . . I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or menace. . . . Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn’t talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. (Conrad, *Heart* 30)

The passage quoted above is the ultimate expression of Marlow’s characteristic belittling of Nature. In his condescending visualisation, Nature is no more an enlivening aesthetic realm; rather, it is a crude manifestation of discomfiting silence. Portraying the forest as a colossal embodiment of morbid stillness, this passage portrays Nature as a devoiced entity bereft of any pulsating presence. Such an attitudinal fallacy on the part of Marlow towards Nature perfectly echoes Adorno and Horkheimer’s fiery censure of the unrestricted freedom attributed to man by the myth of Enlightenment that has led to the devoicing of Nature. Adorno, in particular, believes that there is a noticeable slump in man’s aesthetic appreciation of Nature after Enlightenment. As evidently seen in the above-mentioned passage, Nature, instead of receiving an aesthetic appreciation from man, is rather described as being an entity that is deaf and dumb. This dehumanisation of Nature, believes Adorno, originates from the enormous sense of utopian freedom and dignity of man that gradually led to the undermining of the pristine beauty of Nature. He reckons:

Natural beauty vanished from aesthetics as a result of the burgeoning domination of the concept of freedom and human dignity . . . in accord with this

concept nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank. The truth of such freedom for the subject, however, is at the same time unfreedom for the other. (81)

Instead of nurturing an aesthetic appreciation of Nature, man fosters a repulsive attitude towards it and sees it as something abominable and detestable. During the voyage into African Nature in *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, Marlow is haunted by a sense of “a mournful and senseless delusion” inflicted on him by the “oily and languid sea” and the “uniform sombreness of the coast” (Conrad 14) and also the “mournful stillness of the groove” (Conrad 17). The river, the mud, the mangroves and all the other elements of Nature torment him with “the extremity of an impotent despair” (Conrad, *Heart* 15). What becomes evident here is that entering the realms of the impassive, mute Nature is no longer a pleasurable experience for the Western man of culture; rather, it is a disdainful and painful one. As rightly pointed out by Adorno, there is a serious loss of aesthetic sensibility towards Nature on the part of modern man resulting from the effect of Enlightenment. This, believes Herbert Read, has paralleled the modern man’s progressive estrangement from Nature because of which he suffers from an “atrophy of sensibility” (38) incited in him by his scientific and technological achievements that harbour in him the illusion that he lives outside or above the natural world.

In this context of the “otherisation” of Nature through diverse forms, it is learnt that the cultural sophistications of man always smother the animistic life-form of Nature and present it as a devoiced human artifact. Throwing ample light on how the “Real environment” is camouflaged and estranged from the sphere of human existence and re-presented as a mere “artifact” in the hands of the social man, Catriona Sandilands construes: “Nature is partly and always a social product of the (power-laden and power-producing) interactions among humans and non-humans, partly and always an ‘artifact. Nature is thus not . . . Real; nature has a cultural presence . . .’” (139). What Sandilands means by “the Real Nature” is the animistic life-form of Nature that extends beyond the confinements of man’s language and culture. Ironically however, Nature finds expression only through man’s comprehension, language and culture tainted by his overriding anthropocentric hubris.

The estrangement of the mute, unresponsive Nature also takes place on the basis of temporality, one among the various forms of its otherisation. The profound muteness of African Nature makes the colonisers realise that they are posited in a prehistoric time. Marlow’s journey

across the remarkably silent river Congo gives him an experience of traveling back in time. "Going up the dumb river [Congo]," he says, "was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world . . ." (Conrad, *Heart* 39). Further, he describes that being "bewitched and cut off for ever from everything" (Conrad, *Heart* 39), the colonisers "glided past like noiseless phantoms" (Conrad, *Heart* 41) into "another existence perhaps" (Conrad, *Heart* 39). In addition, Marlow finds himself "traveling in the night of first ages that are gone, leaving hardly a voice, a sign—and no memories" (Conrad, *Heart* 41-42). The colonisers, as depicted by Marlow, find themselves "wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet . . . taking possession of a mute and accursed inheritance" (Conrad, *Heart* 41). Through the reiterated evocations of the muteness and unresponsiveness of Nature, the colonial man asserts his disjunction from it at all levels, even at the level of temporality where Nature's muteness is associated with its atavism. Moreover, the fact that the colonisers were taking possession of the "mute and accursed inheritance [i.e. Nature] is another glaring evidence of their perception of Nature as a helpless mute object exclusively meant for anthropocentric possession. Such disparaging descriptions of Nature by Marlow are the testimonial evidences of the Western colonial man's purposeful "otherisation" of Nature for the purpose of justifying his own ascendancy over it.

It is also interesting to note that the anthropocentrically imposed muteness of Nature facilitates man to use Nature as an antithetical "concept" against which the modern man constantly redefines himself. As David Delaney rightly points out, "The Nature that is constructed is a concept, a category, an idea, a set of conventionalized metaphors, and a trope for differentiation" (489). Elucidating such a feeling of severance, Marlow finds Nature in Africa to be a "grimy fragment of another world" (Conrad, *Heart* 83) where Nature's "otherness" is instrumental in defining and asserting man's "self" against his presupposed antithesis, Nature. Exposing the disgraceful perception of Nature, Marlow's descriptions espouse how the modern man is caught within a stultifying pettiness that mirrors nothing but his ego-maniac little "self."

In the final analysis, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the clear confirmation of the Western man's chronic cynicism towards Nature. Considering it to be a lifeless, dispirited, unresponsive "other," the egomaniac Western man fails to form an effective communion with its animistic vigour. Such an apathetic and dispassionate posture, however, leads to cataclysmic consequences culminating in his own alienation and suffering. Raising grave concerns over the Western man's jaundiced perception of Nature, this article in the end, advocates for a paradigm shift in his attitude towards it and the inculcation of an enlivening relation with the same.

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