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E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817 *Remarking An Analisation*

Double Marginalization of Woman & Nature: Joseph Conrad's Ecofeminist Discourse in His Colonial Fiction

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Abstract

Ecofeminism explores the fundamental principles behind the disrespect shown by man not only towards woman, but also its symbolic counterpart, Nature. The Western philosophical tradition, patriarchal at large, comes under vehement ecofeminist reproach for its complicit endorsement of the denigration of Nature and woman through their enforced symbolic alignment. Estrangement of woman and Nature from the cultural terrain of man pervades Joseph Conrad's colonial fiction and hence, the latter becomes a prospective site for ecofeminist critical intervention. In the light of the evolving ecofeminist theoretical inputs, this paper intends to bring out a systematic analysis of the intricate mechanism of the demeaning attitude that the patriarchal Western coloniser harbours towards Nature and woman in Joseph Conrad's colonial fiction.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Anthropocentrism, Postcolonialism, Enlightenment, Ecophilosophy

Introduction

The renowned British author Joseph Conrad's colonial fiction has been subject to vehement feminist criticism for his derogatory treatment of women in his novels. Nina Pelican Strauss, in her immensely strong feminist reading "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing," criticises Conrad for debarring women from an active participation in the pursual and disclosure of the secret truth of the male world at the same time excoriating the male-centeredness of the existing Conrad criticism. Among others who have picked apart Conrad for not providing adequate space for women voices in his works are critics like Graham Hough[1], Frederick Karl[2], Neville Newhouse[3] and Joyce Carol Oates[4]. Though there have been several feminist readings of Conrad's works over the years, the existing critical canon on Conrad, nevertheless, has failed to analyse the mechanism of women's denigration, in his oeuvre, through their symbolic association with Nature—an issue that has constituted the vantage point of ecofeminism. Pictures of women's unflinching association with Nature are explicit in Conrad's late nineteenth century narration including his African novel *Heart of Darkness* (which happens to be his magnum opus) and his early Malayan novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*. An ecofeminist reading of these novels, therefore, opens up new avenues for a thorough and deeper understanding of the nature and mechanism of women's denigration in his novels through their symbolic alignments with Nature.

Aim of the Study

This paper, therefore, undertakes the work of analysing, with the help of ecofeminist theory, the intricate function of the patriarchal machinery in Conrad's works towards effectuating the simultaneous denigration of women and Nature. Before` proceeding further, it is however necessary to provide some explication of the basic theoretical postulates of ecofeminism.

Victoria Davion, while reflecting on the defining principles of ecofeminism, decides its vantage point to be the exploration of the "twin domination of woman and nature" (234) by patriarchy. Her statement, revelatory of their concurrent subjugation by the male world, obliquely hints at the symbolic analogy between them, though construed by patriarchy. In the process of digging out its causative history, ecofeminism holds the androcentric Western discursive practices (fashioned mainly by the Platonic[5], Aristotelian[6] and the Jewish-Christian[7] traditions) responsible for creating a thoroughly dichotomous weltanschauung with man at the apex

and women, Nature and animals at the bottom. Corroborated by numerous other Manichean binary oppositions like culture/nature, reason/unreason and mind/body, this dualism creates two polarised worlds—One, masculine and the other, feminine. The former, accredited with the finer attributes of reason and culture, assumes for itself an elevated status whereas woman and Nature are validated as symbolically equal and deplorable "sexualities" for sharing the lesser and expendable elements of unreason and body.

Coming to the above-mentioned novels of Conrad, it can be observed that an enforced kinship between woman and Nature is the strategic tool of their "otherisation" from the predominantly patriarchal world that the Conradian fiction constructs. Construed as entities that are dark, mysterious, unknowable, disturbing and antagonistic to the male world, women and Nature are seen as abject but transgressive sexualities perennially thwarting the male domination and thereby constantly demanding forceful subjugation by patriarchy. In corroboration with the above notion, we see in *An Outcast of the Islands* that the colonial protagonist Willems[8] is thoroughly disturbed by the feral enigma of the Malayan Nature, particularly that of the forest and the landscape, and its symbolic equal, the native Malayan woman Aissa. In *Almayer's Folly*, similarly, both the Malayan Nature and Almayer's[9] native wife flummox the protagonist Almayer's arrogated cultural superiority with their conjointly mysterious, witch-like female sexualities, whereas in *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz's native African mistress is seen as an ostensible manifestation of the tenebrous savagery of African Nature. It must be understood, nevertheless, that such purposeful barbarisation of Nature and woman is part of man's self-styled legitimisation of his venture to subjugate them under his masculine command.

An Outcast of the Islands

As has been mentioned earlier, Joseph Conrad's early Malayan tale *An Outcast of the Islands*, conforms to the "otherisation" of woman and Nature through their symbolic association. "Womanizing of nature and the naturizing of woman" (125), as Connie Bullis would call the process, start with the protagonist Willems' first encounter with the native Malayan lady Aissa. The narrator describes:

> Who was she? Where did she come from? . . . but now, as he looked at that life again, his eyes seemed able to pierce the fantastic veil of creepers and leaves, to look past the solid trunks, to see through the forbidding gloom—and the mystery was disclosed—enchanting, subduing, beautiful. . . . He looked at the woman. . . . The very spirit of that land of mysterious forests, standing before him like an apparition behind a transparent veil—a veil woven of sunbeams and shadows. (Conrad, *Outcast* 61)

As delineated in the above passage, the native Malayan woman Aissa, reflecting the enigmatic spirit of the Malayan forest, is no more than a symbolic embodiment of Nature. What is strikingly observable here is that the image of the forest is evoked through its substitutive female body—a site imbued with unknown secrets of mysterious Nature. In addition, what is foregrounded here is not just the abundance of the material riches of the scene, but also the element of "mystery," "unknowableness" or "otherness" associated with Nature and woman.

To make matters worse, the narrator informs us that "Willems, looking at this strange, muffled figure [of Aissa], felt exasperated, [and] amazed" (Conrad, *Outcast,* 96)—a statement that is suggestive of Aissa being a troubling 'other' for Willems. The unbridgeable separation between Willems and Aissa is further emphasised when the narrator describes:

> She [Aissa] would never change! This manifestation of her sense of proprieties was another sign of their hopeless diversity; something like another step downwards for him. She was too different from him. He was too civilized! It struck him suddenly that they had nothing in common—not a thought, not a feeling; he could not make clear to her the simplest motive of any act of his . . . (Conrad, *Outcast* 97)

The above description of Aissa's difference and concomitant inferiority from Willems is an affirmation of Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood's concept of "hyperseparation" or "radical exclusion" (49). While playing a crucial role in upholding the dualism discussed earlier, "hyperseparation" prevents contiguity between polarised spheres in a situation where the 'other' is to be treated as "not merely different but inferior" (49). Albert Memmi in his famous book *The Coloniser and the Colonised* explicates how such an unbridgeable separation works as an efficacious means of the colonisation of Nature and woman. He explains: ".once the behavioural feature, or historical or geographical factor, which characterises the colonialist and contrasts him with the colonised, has been isolated, this gap must be kept from being filled" (71-72). Willems' categorical rejection of any commonality between himself and Aissa erects an impermeable barrier between their respective spheres of existences— Willems' being the sphere of European culture and Aissa's being that of the native Malayan Nature. As a consequence, the native lady Aissa, representing the dark, mysterious Nature, becomes an embodiment of Nature and woman's difference and inferiority from the quintessential pre-eminence of Willems' culture. Accentuating this "hyperseparation," the narrator also lets us know that Willems has always remained "contemptuously indifferent to all feminine influence;" has always been "full of scorn for men that would submit to it;" and has always felt himself "superior [to Nature and woman] even in his errors" (Conrad, *Outcast* 65).

In this ongoing dehumanisation of Nature/woman, the coloniser adds a further dimension by inflicting on them the deplorably mercurial status of being man's capricious adversary playing deceptive

witchery pranks on him. The description of the sea in *An Outcast of the Islands* through diabolic feminine images substantiates the above notion. The narrator describes:

> Like a beautiful and unscrupulous woman, the sea of the past was glorious in its smiles, irresistible in its anger, capricious, enticing, illogical, irresponsible; a thing to love, a thing to fear. It cast a spell, it gave joy, it lulled gently into boundless faith; then with quick and causeless anger it killed. But its cruelty was redeemed by the charm of its inscrutable mystery, by the immensity of its promise, by the supreme witchery of its possible favour. Strong men with childlike hearts were faithful to it, were content to live by its grace—to die by its will. (Conrad, *Outcast* 24-25)

The attribution of ambiguous and treacherous qualities to the sea, as described in the above passage, makes her a perfidious woman. The ambiguity that is sustained in this narration indicates that, despite her outward semblance of enthralling beauty, the sea inwardly harbours an underlying threat for the colonial man. Such apocryphal conceptualisation of the sea on the part of colonial patriarchy is, of course, part of his implicit endeavour to justify and legitimise his venture to conquer the feminine Nature.

As per the encoded norms of patriarchal thinking, nevertheless, this transgressive virago (i.e. Nature) is to be tamed and controlled by the application of vigorous masculine force—a force that is realised through the metaphor of "rape." In this scenario, Nature is metaphorised as a woman to be raped and molested. The colonial march into the distaff terrain of the sea, as described by the narrator, substantiates the above notion:

> . . . countless steamboats . . . [were] spread over the restless mirror of the Infinite [sea]. The hand of the engineer tore down the veil of the terrible beauty. . . . The mystery was destroyed. . . .The hearts changed; the men changed. The once loving and devoted servants went out armed with fire and iron, and . . . became a calculating crowd of cold and exacting masters. The sea of the past was an incomparably beautiful mistress, with inscrutable face, with cruel and promising eyes. The sea of to-day is a used-up drudge, wrinkled and defaced by the churned-up wakes of brutal propellers, robbed of the enslaving charm of its vastness, stripped of its beauty, of its mystery and of its promise. (Conrad, *Outcast* 25)

The description in the above passage succinctly evokes the image of "rape." Once a beautiful mistress, the sea, now becomes defaced, wrinkled, unveiled, stripped and raped by the colonial engineers. Such gendered images and epithets exemplify how the colonial explorers, equipped with modern science and technology, employ womanly fantasies to devalue Nature through its feminine sexualisation. Further, the narrator's opinion that the white rulers, being "armed with fire and iron" (Conrad, *Outcast* 25) hold the "land and the sea under the edge of sharp swords" (Conrad, *Outcast* 85), envisages the colonial man's military fantasies against the feminine Nature where weapons like fire, iron, and sharp swords are emblematical of what Carol Cohn calls "the phallic imagery and promise of sexual domination" (134). Such sexist Nature-dominating ideology, of course, has its roots in The Enlightenment. Francis Bacon, the ideological father of the Enlightenment campaign, in a notorious remark of his, advises man to "bind her [Nature] to . . . [his] service and make her . . . [his] slave" (qtd. in Leiss 55). The narrator, through similar Baconian perceptions, describes the sea as a slave serving her master as he observes: ". . . womanlike, the sea served him humbly . . . (Conrad, *Outcast* 25). Eva Feder Kittay, in her influential article, "Woman as Metaphor," succinctly explains how man's experience of conquering and enslaving Nature is frequently articulated through the former's forceful subjugation of woman. She arguably demonstrates how man uses woman as a "metaphoric vehicle" (Kittay 63) for Nature—a practice that equips him with a rich domain of feminine images through which he can conceptualise his master-slave relation between himself and Nature. He talks about conquering the land, the sea, and the mountain as if conquering woman. Kittay very fittingly comments: "Man identifies that which he wants and desires, or has acquired . . . as Woman . . . .These examples direct us to consider the importance of woman's metaphorization in the conceptual organization of man's experience" (64).

Almayer's Folly

An analogically common ground of savagery, construed by patriarchy, becomes another ploy for the combined seclusion of woman and Nature in Conrad's early Malaya tale *Almayer's Folly*. To begin with, we first observe that Almayer's Malayan wife is derogated as a wild, untamed animal of the forest through her congenital affinity with Malayan Nature. The "savage tigress," as Almayer would designate her, is described as being full of "a flood of savage invective" towards the "signs of civilisation" (Conrad, *Almayer* 263). Moreover, her daughter Nina[10] is also described to be living in the "private sphere" of her "savage mother"—a sphere that the narrator slanders as the "hopeless quagmire of barbarism full of strong and uncontrolled [feminine] passions," (Conrad 274) contrary to Almayer's "public sphere" of masculine reason and culture. The inevitable gap between these two diametrically opposite modes of living is maintained by ghettoizing Mrs. Almayer to a "riverside hut" in Malayan Nature "in perfect seclusion" (Conrad, *Almayer* 264) from Almayer's culture. Such a grouping between Nature, woman, emotion and passion on the one hand and culture, man and reason on the other results in what Val Plumwood calls "homogenisation[11]" (53). In this process, Nature and woman are homogenised into one single group of the inferior "other." Nina's "homogenisation[12]" with the Malayan Nature and her estrangement from

civilisation is described by the narrator in the following lines: "And now she had lived on the river for three years with a savage mother. . . . She had lived a life devoid of all the decencies of civilisation, in miserable domestic conditions . . . it had seemed to her that she had known no other life" (Conrad, *Almayer* 274).

The woman-Nature connection is further accentuated through the narrator's opinion that Nina is not worthy of "Christian teaching, social education, and a good glimpse of civilized life" in Singapore because of "her nature" (Conrad, *Almayer* 274)—an expression that demands deep speculation. In the understanding of her teachers, her savage nature, probably an automatic legacy imparted to her by the Malayan Nature in which she lived previously, makes her inadaptable to the cultural and civilised city-life of Singapore. Her education, as a result, terminates in "a sense of humiliation" (Conrad, *Almayer* 274) and she is sent back to Malaya. She belongs, construes the narrator, to the "circumstances of a half-savage and miserable life" (Conrad, *Almayer* 267) in the Malayan forest.

Not only Mrs. Almayer and Nina, but also the slave girl Taminah (the slave of Bulangi) is presented as a savage creature of Malayan Nature devoid of the slightest sign of civilisation. The narrator describes the life of Taminah as:

> She lived like the tall palms amongst whom she was passing now, seeking the light, desiring the sunshine, fearing the storm, unconscious of either. The slave had no hope, and knew of no change. She knew of no other sky, no other water, no other forest, no other world, no other life. She had no wish, no hope, no love, no fear except of a blow, and no vivid feeling . . . (Conrad, *Almayer* 319)

The comparison of Taminah to palm trees struggling for light in Nature's darkness is another evidence of the patriarchy-imposed woman-Nature merger—a tenet that originates, quite emphatically, from what Janis Birkeland would call an "androcentric premise" (24) of thinking.

Heart of Darkness

The symbolic transference of each other's images between Nature and woman further continues in Conrad's magnum opus *Heart of Darkness*. As another case of the feminisation of Nature, the experience of the wilderness of the African jungle is variously expressed through an entire range of witchery images including eroticism, embrace and treacherous assault. For instance, Marlow describes Kurtz's captivity by the wilderness of Africa in the following terms:

> The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite. (Conrad, *Heart* 57)

Observably, the assault of the powers of the wilderness on Kurtz is presented in terms of witchery pranks. Nature's wilderness acts a witch, hypnotises Kurtz and finally kills him. Noticeably, an immanence of malignancy is injected into Nature by evoking its allegorical feminine sexualisation in the form of a witch. Such an irrational and groundless hatred for the natural world by the colonisers is what Simon C. Estok prefers to call "ecofobia" (4).

In the ongoing patriarchal construction of the symbolic equality between Nature and woman, Kurtz's native African mistress is described as a blunt manifestation of the tenebrous savagery of Nature. She is introduced as "a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" emanating from the "gloomy border of the forest" (Conrad, *Heart* 73) and being decorated with "barbarous ornaments" and "bizarre things" (Conrad, *Heart* 73). So, everything about her is wild, savage, and barbarous like Nature's savagery. Describing her egression from Nature, Marlow recounts:

> She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (Conrad, *Heart* 74)

The description is a glaring manifestation of how the masculine coloniser devises a common ground of savagery between Nature and woman to marginalise both from his cultural terrain. Additionally, Marlow describes: "She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose" (Conrad, *Heart* 74). The fact that the "immense wilderness" finds "its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (Conrad, *Heart* 74) in Kurtz's African mistress and on the reverse, she stands "like the wilderness itself" (Conrad, *Heart* 74) creates a scenario where Nature becomes woman and woman becomes Nature. This patriarchy-imposed woman-Nature connection is further accentuated when the narrator observes: "Suddenly she [Kurtz's mistress] opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky . . ." (Conrad, *Heart* 74). The irrepressible desire of the woman to touch the sky, as conceived by the coloniser, is again redolent of her innate affinity with Nature.

The construal of the symbolic connection between woman and Nature finally leads to the sexual violence of the colonial man on feminine Nature as seen previously in *An Outcast of the Islands*. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's march into African Nature is conceptualised as a "penetration" into the "virgin forest" (Conrad 34) forcing her to yield up her secrets. Delineating the journey as an unraveling venture towards Nature's abounding mystery that "lay deep under the surface" (Conrad, *Heart* 45), Marlow recounts: "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (Conrad, *Heart* 41). He also readily

recognises that the only desire of the colonisers is to "tear treasure out of the bowels of the land" (Conrad, *Heart* 35) where the very expression "tear" is loaded with characteristic masculine undertones of violence against feminine Nature's womb. The point is, as Marlow sees it, that Nature has to be raided with the spirit of sexual invasion. The "tenebrous land," as he describes, is invaded by the "mean and greedy" (Conrad, *Heart* 83) colonisers in a scenario where "Nature herself . . . [tries] to ward off the intruders" (Conrad, *Heart* 14-15). Noticeably, the encounter of the colonial man with Nature is mostly gestated in terms of a clash between coercive male (man) and assailable female (Nature) sexualities. An embittered Annette Kolodny, on such a gendered perception of Nature, is amply justified to comment: "Perhaps, after all, the world is really gendered, in some subtle way we have not yet quite understood" (9). Penetration, infiltration, intrusion and unraveling, in the end, epitomise the essence of the mission as famous Conrad critic H. M. Daleski construes: "In such a progress it is an ability to penetrate, rather than a capacity to steer,that is of primary importance" (51). Further, Marlow's statement that "The reaches opened before us . . ." (Conrad, *Heart* 41) suggests another sexualised image of Nature, who like a woman, is progressively unfolding her mysteries and secrets before the colonial man. Evidently, the femininity of Nature becomes a "metaphoric vehicle" (as described earlier) for the articulation of the male experience of "penetration" into the virgin territory of Nature.

Conclusion

So, as symbolic equals, both Nature and woman are subjects of man's scorn and domination. Gestated through various deprecating images, Nature is either a dark and mysterious "Other" or a fickle woman playing pranks with man or a transgressive virago constantly eluding the limiting dimensions of the male territory or an ensconced feminine space resisting male intrusion or a feminine womb full of extractible treasure. Woman, on the other hand, is construed as a metaphor for Nature's wilderness. An ecofeminist approach, hence, not only reveals the opprobrious undertones of such patriarchy-imposed symbolic reciprocity between Nature and woman but also vehemently censures such a practice.

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Foot Notes

1. *In 1960, Graham Hough showed Conrad's inaccessibility into the women's world and his being fully engrossed in a "male world." (214). See Hough, Graham. Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Evolution. London: Duckworth, 1960.*
2. *Frederick Karl describes that Conrad's stereotypical descriptions of women characters in his novels are "disastrous" (902). See Karl, Frederick R. Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives. London: Faber, 1979.*
3. *Neville Newhouse opines that "Conrad invest[s] femininity with an aura of sacred distance. His women, just because they are women, are set apart" (74). See Newhouse, Neville H. Joseph Conrad. London: Evan Brothers, 1966.*
4. *Joyce Carol Oates is convinced that "Conrad's quite serious idea of a heroine is always someone who effaces herself completely, who is eager to sacrifice herself in an ecstasy of love for her man" (84). See Oates, Joyce Carol. Contraries: Essays. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.*
5. *Plato, in his Republic, says that women are weaker than men in every sphere of society.*
6. *Aristotle, in his Politics, is of the opinion that "male are by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; and this principle of necessity extends to all mankind" (qtd. in Plumwood 46). Apart from his authentication of man's domination of woman, Aristotle also authenticates man's domination of animals as he says: "The same holds good for animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by men . . ." (qtd. in Plumwood 46). See Plumwood, Val. Feminism and the Mastery of Nature. London: Routledge, 1993. Print. According to Australian*

ecofeminist Val Plumwood, the basis of the Aristotelian denigration of women and animals is that they are close to Nature and away from culture which, in fact, is the domain of man.

7. *In Christianity, women have been derogated by being called as the seducer of man to commit sin. Adam, in Bible, holds women responsible for the "original sin" he committed. So, woman is being described as an immoral being in Christianity. In Judaism, similarly, women are seen as being unclean and therefore, a spiritual threat to Jewish men. Women, in Judaism, did not have the right to full religious participation, public intervention or authority. On the whole, the Judeo-Christian tradition led to the derogation of women.*
8. *Willems is the protagonist of Conrad's early Malaya novel An Outcast of the Islands. An European coloniser, Willems falls in love with the native Malayan lady Aissa. This love, however, is momentary and finally takes the form of hatred as Willems sees Aissa as the embodiment of the Malayan jungle with all its savagery. Being a product of the European culture, he despises both the Malayan land and its lady, Aissa.*
9. *Almayer is the protagonist of Conrad's another early Malayan novel Almayer's Folly. He was married to a native Malayan girl (against his will though) whom he hated throughout his life as he always saw her as a savage avatar of Malayan Nature.*
10. *Nina is the daughter of Almayer and Mrs. Almayer. Almayer always wanted to keep her away from her mother and the Malayan jungle. He sent her to Singapore to get English education and to get acquainted with the cultural values of Europe. In Singapore, however, ina was grossly humiliated for her inborn affinity with the Malayan jungle.*
11. *Val Plumwood, while explaining her idea of "homogenisation (or stereotyping)" says that this is a technique of colonisation in which the coloniser erases all difference between the different members of the "colonised" group" (Nature and women, for instance) so as to make the act of colonisation much easier. Plumwood therefore says: "o the master, all the rest are just that: 'the rest'" (54). See Plumwood, Val. Feminism and the Mastery of Nature. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.*