POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM OF CONRAD’S HEART OF DARKNESS

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial criticisms of literary texts remain incomplete without taking into consideration the ecocritical perspectives. The colonizer while colonizing a race of people also colonizes the land. Both the land and its people become resources to be exploited for economic profits. The foundation of western system of thought and knowledge has been formulated on the construction of dichotomies—between nature/culture, white/black, men/women. The conjoining of the two ‘others’—‘nature and black’, which enables the white colonizer to solidify its claim of superiority, makes it inevitable to look at colonial/postcolonial literature through the lens of ecocriticism.

Postcolonial criticism often risks taking an anthropocentric stand relegating nature to an inert, secondary position that does not need any a platform of expression. We forget that dynamic nature is the source and means of our human existence and hence it needs to be kept at the forefront while discussing issues that affect our lives.

In the Heart of Darkness, Conrad tries to interrogate the colonial (mis)endeavours of the white Europeans, but fails to fully engage the colonized land and people in this dialogue. He is limited by an underlying, subconscious, patronizing thought of being responsible to eke out justice for the weak and exploited. He fails to offer to them a platform to articulate their protest against their relentless exploitation. Africa and its inhabitants remain voiceless and handicapped in desperate need for a white, male saviour. This is in complete insolence to the identity that a land and people have had since antiquity.

Keywords: Postcolonial Criticism; Ecocriticism; Heart of Darkness; Africa

In the Introduction to the first part of the book Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment, Pablo Mukherjee has been said to suggest that postcolonial studies cannot be considered without taking due note of the environmental elements like water, land, energy, migration etc. Postcolonial studies and ecocritical studies are, as such, inextricably intertwined and so, moving away from the usual anthropocentric postcolonial discourse, it is necessary to take into account the effects that the imperial and colonial enterprise had on the environment of the colonies. The word ‘environment’ here, according to many critics, becomes problematic because it suggests something external to humans thus facilitating the binary of human/nature. Imperialism and the materialistic civilization that emerged in the west always saw nature and the animal as ‘the other’, an outsider that is an endlessly replenishable resource at the disposal and service of the humans (the Europeans). In the colonies the colonizers came face-to-face with a different idea of ‘being-in-the-world’ as against that of the natives in the regard to the relationship between humans and animals (nature). Technological advancement of the colonizers enabled them to irretrievably derange the ecosystem and, as a result, the culture of the indigenous people under the guise of conferring the gifts of ‘civilization and culture’ upon the savages.
In regard to postcolonial ecocriticism, we must look at the human/nature relationship, its problems and its representations without favouring an anthropomorphic view of the text. While entering the discussion on representation it is absolutely essential to look at the interpretation and representation of nature and the natives in colonial discourses. The Europeans’ encounter with a people living in harmony with nature and in a way that is completely different from the European way of life resulted in the denial and destruction of any alternative understanding of such crucial relationship and interaction between human and nature. The colonial view of nature is limited to their idea of the marketability of nature as they indulge in what Arturo Escobar calls “developmentalization of the environment” (Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin: 2010, pp.33). Inspite of the idea of development attached to it, this kind of a view of nature only results in asset stripping and spiritual desecration and material dispossession of the natives.

Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is a monumental work that has invited a lot of debate and discussion in the field of postcolonial criticism. It is considered to be a critique of the colonialist policies of Belgium as practiced in the Congo under King Leopold II in the later part of the nineteenth century. Though a critique of colonialism, the authoritative image of Africa that the novel has disseminated is a subject of much contestation. Writers like Chinua Achebe have dismissed Conrad’s portrayal of Africa as Eurocentric and hence as greatly limited and misleading. While reading the novel from the perspective of ecocriticism the work of critiquing the text becomes even more problematic. Apart from denying language to the natives, the novel also shows that the transposition of the western ideas of human/nature relationship to the colonies and their displacing of the completely different ideas and practices of the colonies has a transformative effect on the colonizers themselves. However, this transformation, portrayed primarily through the character of Kurtz, seems to be self-destructive and one of ‘horror’.

From the very beginning of the novel natural entities like the river and the sea are looked at from a very anthropocentric, imperialist point of view. The reference made to the sea as “the mistress of his existence” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.5), clearly marks shows that European/Western thought always considered nature as a replenishable resource to be exploited. Now, moving onto the portrayal of Africa and the African landscape we see that Africa is shown to be “protean and “featureless” (Anne McClintock, pp.41). Marlow as a white boy saw Africa as a “blank space of delightful mystery” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.9) on the map and then as a “space of darkness” (ibid.). Such a view of an entire continent inhabited by a people with their own distinct history and culture is caused by the inability of the Europeans to comprehend a landscape and the accompanying culture which is completely different and more often than not contradictory to their own. It is the limitation imposed by western thought that resulted in such ignorance and denial and finally the misrepresentation of Africa, its landscape and its people.

The idea of representation inevitably brings in the question of language. The colonizer finds an “unbaptized” (Anne McClintock, pp.43) land having no meaning because it can be described in a language inherited from a very different history. Given the western idea about knowledge being available to all human beings, and it is to be noted that for the colonizers only the Europeans could be called so, the incomprehensibility of this landscape is “detestable” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.7 ). This incomprehensibility is also what creates a gap between the perception of the land by the colonizer and the “innermost essence” (Anne McClintock, pp.42), the truth underlying the landscape. This point is exemplified by Marlow’s statement that, “the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things “, (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.15). The inability to capture the ‘irrational’ alien landscape in ‘rational’ language results in a very specific kind of misrepresentation. As can be understood from Marlow’s statement, “all along the formless coast was bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.55), the failure on the part of the colonizer to define and faithfully represent the landscape is transferred back to nature and termed as hostility of the landscape towards the colonizer.
Here, it is interesting to note how the anthropocentric western thought immediately gives human qualities to nature. This is an important point in regard to ecocriticism.

The failure, the unavailability of the history that spans beyond the memory of the colonizer and the consequent unavailability of the language causes an arousal of a desire to revert back to that remote ancestral past from which the colonizer seems to have severed himself. Marlow talking of his life in England in terms of being “crowded with memories of men and ships” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.4), and then making a statement like, "We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign and no memories" (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.44), during his journey to the interior of Congo shows a loss of cultural memory. This loss is again transferred back to the landscape and it is designated as “primitive, infantile, and incomplete” (Anne McClintock, pp.46). The reverting back to this past is given more emphasis in case of Kurtz and the way in which it is done again becomes a crucial point in the novel’s postcolonial ecocriticism.

“But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.72).

These lines about Kurtz, as spoken by Marlow, represent the landscape of Africa as a wilderness that is vengeful, hostile and savage. A very important critique of Conrad’s representation of Africa relies on this idea of the wild African landscape as arousing ‘primitive’ desires in ‘cultured’ men, desires that must be kept in check, desires that arouse the animalistic in human beings. This is the self-destructive transformative effect that was referred to before in the paper in regard to the imposition of the western ideas of human/nature relationship on a land and culture like that of Africa. Though this transformation makes Kurtz see the darkness that resides within him – the darkness of the brutality and savagery of the imperialist and colonialist practices itself, it nevertheless is shown to take Kurtz back to a primitive and ‘uncultured’, ‘uncivilized’ state of being – to a state of a different kind of darkness. The imagery of “snake” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.11) that Marlow or the author persona uses to talk about the river Congo again reinforces these ideas of arousing ‘primitive’ desires, of being dangerous and harmful associated with the African wilderness by the colonizer. In the colonial/postcolonial context this association with the snake becomes even more important because of the biblical connection that the snake has and the missionary activities of ‘civilizing’ the ‘brutes’ that the colonialists had ‘taken up’. Even in terms of ecocriticism this association becomes interesting and important because the snake is anthropomorphized and through it the river given animalistic qualities.

‘Silence’ is one of the very significant words used by Conrad to describe the African landscape. In these sentences "The woods . . . looked with the air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence" (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.71), and “a sense of vague and oppressive wonder” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.17), it is evident that Marlow recognizes the fact that the landscape holds in its interior a treasure of knowledge. But the colonizer’s inability partake of this knowledge because of the limitations imposed on him by the philosophy and ideas (western) that he has inherited makes him create an image of the landscape as hostile, vengeful and holding within itself a brooding force that is hazardous for the colonizer. In his inability to define the landscape in language, the colonizer sees and represents the landscape as monstrously silent, in terms of an absence. This again is anthropomorphizing of the natural landscape and is opposed to how ecocritics believe nature should be represented as.

Speciesism and racism, like postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism, are again intertwined in the history of human oppression of ‘other’. In western thought where animals are considered only as natural resources at the disposal and serviced of man, these animals have no part in literature apart from being used as metaphors or symbols. In genocidal and marginalizing discourses animals are used as metaphors and as a derogatory term. By talking of human beings in terms of animals, the ones in
power try to justify their exploitation, objectification, slaughter and enslavement of these human beings. The creation of the human/animal dichotomy is used to highlight the ‘animalistic’ in the natives. By use of this dichotomy the words like ‘savage’, ‘beast’ ‘cannibals’ and ‘slaves’ become metonymic, one inevitably leading to another so that the colonizer can justify his own brutality. While making use of this binary, the colonialist relegates the human to the animalistic and refuses any place of identity to the animal. In Heart of Darkness, the Africans are dehumanized and virtually dismembered—“bundles of acute angles” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.20). Their movements and actions are given animalistic character when they are compared to ants and are referred to as ‘howling’ and ‘leaping’ while their clothes are compared to various animal body parts. Infact when Marlow says, “The bush began to howl” (Conrad: 1899, 2007 reprinted, pp.55) it merges the natives with the landscape thus conferring upon them a primeval formlessness. Besides this, the natives have no presence in the novel. They are denied language too. On the other hand, the animal which is responsible for the imperial wealth in the novel—the elephant, remains absent. Its presence is only found as an absent referent to its valuable remains—ivory and meat.

Cannibalism, again in the colonialist discourse, is used as a weapon of ‘othering’ both humans and animals. As has been discussed by many critics, cannibalism is a rare phenomenon having ritualistic importance rather than being a regular survival practice. It infact turns out to be an obsession with the colonizers themselves. By laying emphasis on these ideas, the colonizer tries to assert his superiority in terms of morality, civilization and culture while degrading the natives. In regard to this Montaigne’s philosophical idea on cannibalism seems very pertinent for he considers the exploitation, oppression and torture of fellow human beings as more barbaric and cannibalistic than eating of a dead body of the same species. In the novel, Marlow thinks of his African crew as cannibals. Even though he critiques the colonialist oppression through this, his thoughts remain Eurocentric, looking at the natives from a prejudiced perspective.

The human/animal relationship, in the colonialist discourse, is seen from the perspective of the Cartesian idea of cogito ergo sum. According to this, a dichotomy is created between the mind and body. The natives and animals, alike, have a body but are represented as lacking a mental faculty by denying them language. In the novel the natives are given no representation and are denied language except some incoherent ‘gabbling’. However, critics of both postcolonial studies and ecocriticism ardently advocate the presence of the consciousness and intelligence in both the natives and animals. They also emphasize on the fact that both have a language of their own even if it is not understood by the colonizers in case of the former and even if it cannot be translated in case of the latter.

The Cartesian idea of cogito ergo sum is also a basis on which the masculine, patriarchal discourse tries to oppress and silence women. Women because of the processes of childbirth and child rearing are considered closer to nature and according to this discourse the closer one is to nature the more uncivilized and brutish one is. Moreover, in being closer to nature women too are denied the presence of any mental faculty and hence are again considered as objects to be used and exploited. In Heart of Darkness, Kurtz as Intended, as such, can be seen as the domesticated animal-like being while the African mistress human manifestation of the wilderness. It also implies that it was Kurtz’s mating with his African mistress that evoked in him the “primitive emotions”.

It is true that Conrad offers a definite denouncement of the exploitation and barbarism of the colonizers in the Congo in Heart of Darkness. However, his critique is fraught with problems because of his representation of Africa and the Africans. The Africans are shown to be innocent but are denied language, culture and a history of their own. Again, the African landscape is portrayed as vengeful and dangerously silent. It is portrayed as exercising a mysterious power over the colonizers and luring them to revert back to a primitive past that Marlow himself finds ugly. So, the novel while being a critique of the colonial enterprise fails to be fully so in terms of contemporary postcolonial ecocriticism.
OBJECTIVES

1. To show the interrelationship between postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism.
2. Limitations of anthropomorphic perspective of nature.
3. Examine the Heart of Darkness through the prism of postcolonial ecocriticism.
4. To critique the representation of Africa in a seminal piece of literary work that seeks to criticize the colonial enterprise.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, “Postcolonial Ecocriticism Of Conrad’s Heart Of Darkness,” it has been established that critiquing of a text from the postcolonial viewpoint is incomplete without taking into account the exploitation that the land of the natives suffer from. The land here refers to nature with all its resources that are exploited for commercial profiteering. While talking of nature and its unabashed abuse we, more often than not, fail to shed our anthropocentric way of thought and discussion. We are limited by our own perceptions of nature and its usefulness for us. Nature in itself, for itself seems to be non-existent. Ecocriticism ensures the presence of nature as its own individual entity not in need of the condescending human sympathy. It rather makes a strong point for desperate human dependency on nature for their survival.

It has been found that Conrad remains incompetent in offering a fully vindicated critique of colonial exploitation of Africa and its people because the novel gives us an impression that Africa and its natives are inarticulate beings of primitive nature, powerless to fight for themselves. He presents the white, European male, sympathetic to the distressing conditions of life of the African blacks as the only voice that could bring upon them salvation from the shackles of colonial exploitation. It has been examined how the limited and false knowledge of the Europeans has caused the pillaging of the distinct identity and culture of Africa as a land and people. It is the decadent ignorance of the white, European male that has cost the fecund colonized lands their identity and opulence.

REFERENCES

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