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Nature as the Fecund Female in Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' is a startlingly insightful revelation into the human mind, but it can also be seen as a fable about human greed. Seen a little differently, however, one might notice in this work narrative patterns that reveal the horrifying abuse and exploitation of some of its characters. So horrifying, in fact, that the subtext overwhelms the narrative voice and nothing Conrad or Marlow says afterward can be taken at face value.

It is not for nothing that 'Heart of Darkness' has been called an "ambiguous" book. It leaves the reader feeling confused. More partial critics credit Conrad with an "ironic sense of humor," but feminists may not be able to go as far as that. Conrad was certainly no lover of women, and his condescension towards women is evident throughout the book.

It is also clear that his sense of definition needs some fine-tuning. For instance, Marlow, Conrad's sotto-voice and one of the narrators in the book, is defined as "moderate" although his actions reveal him to be anything but. Racist to the point of being paranoid, he is repulsed by the natives and anything that reminds him of them. To him, even the jungle the colonizers are exploring represents a bestial female who must be tamed. He finds the silence of the jungle unsettling and comments upon it:

"...the stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect."

Marlow's contempt had its roots in a sense of racial superiority which was strongly ingrained in him. Not only did he believe that the European colonizers were superior to the natives, but he also believed, like other Europeans, that colonization was, in fact, beneficial for the African population. To this end, he saw any opposition by the native people or any perceived opposition from the rivers, the jungle and so on in Africa as being 'anti-development'. He had come to view the African jungle as a female, morally inferior force that was wild, bestial, evil and in need of taming by European colonizers like himself, who, he said, were people of God. In Conrad's book, the jungle is frequently personified as female and there is much emphasis on exploring her dark depths to seek knowledge or find treasure in the 'Heart of Darkness'. The jungle that resists such violation is reminiscent of Lilith, Adam's first wife, who refused to have missionary-style sexual intercourse with him and was therefore condemned to Hell. Lilith, one of the world's first feminists, and a Hell's Angel, frequently comes to mind during Marlow's highly sexist tirades in the 'Heart of Darkness'. The terrible rants are demeaning of all women, but particularly of women of color, and we will dwell upon them in detail as we proceed further.

According to Cedric Watts (1996), Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' has an 'ambiguous style', and this is one of the reasons why a first-time reader can be confused by the tone of the book. This ambiguity also presents a complexity: the 'Heart of Darkness' has a "tale within a tale" structure that was quite common for its time and was, in fact, used by greats such as Maupassant, Kipling and Wells. Watts (1996) further elaborates that this plot structure was frequently used in books which told adventure tales and where men narrated stories to other men as part of the narrative structure, i.e. the target audience and the writers were solely men. It was an enterprise that wholly and completely excluded women, and men were aware of that, although they didn't feel the need to change the status quo. Within this exclusive comfort zone, these men, who saw themselves as elite, intellectual and spiritually enlightened, allowed all the filth of their minds to gush forth.

According to Watts (1996), 'Heart of Darkness' portended the interior of "darkest Africa" but it also portended the corruption of Kurtz. He says that the effort in 'Heart of Darkness' was also to draw parallels between the dark interiors of the African jungle and London, center of the Empire, 'on which the sun never sets'. The novel is full of visual reminders in which London is itself palled in the "brooding gloom" that envelopes the African jungle. To quote Cedric Watts (1996), from 'The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad' (pp 45-59),

"The tale's imagery suggests (that) Kurtz is a modern Faust who has sold his soul for power and gratification; so perhaps Charlie Marlow owes a debt to Christopher Marlowe."

(Watts, 1996, 'The Deceptive Text', pp 74-82)

(Watts, C.; 'The Heart of Darkness', 'The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad', 1996, 45-59)

Kurtz is projected as the epitome of virtue and Marlow idolizes him. Yet, he is actually a Faustian character who stops at nothing in his pursuit of power and wealth. He craves these for their own sake, and is a mercenary megalomaniac who cares for no one but himself. Turned loose upon the African population, he goes berserk, unleashing violence and looting wealth until he eventually dies. Kurtz ultimately falls prey to the jungle, a fate Marlow dreads for himself.

Marlow, despite claiming to be 'agnostic' and 'moderate' has a dismal view of Africa. He cannot seem to understand why it resists European colonization. In the 'Heart of Darkness', he says:

"Never, never before did this land, this river and this jungle, the very arch of the blazing sky appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness."

Marlow's portrayal of Nature in 'Heart of Darkness' is of a silent, cruel, sadistic force that has ensnared the wretched ivory hunters. These, in turn, are portrayed as an innocent, God-fearing bunch of crusaders who have had a terrible run in with the Devil himself. It is in this context that Conrad's representation of Nature in 'The Heart of Darkness' is relevant. To Marlow, Nature is Evil, and as female malevolent. In fact, he goes so far as to think that she resents their explorations and patiently anticipates their deaths. According to Marlow, she offers no helpful solutions to the problems they face in their quest although she seems to know all the answers. Marlow goes on to describe the African jungle as being "inhumane" and "savage" in "her cruelty" towards the European invaders. She seems a terrifying pagan goddess and is certainly no friend of his.

In the 'Heart of Darkness', the African people merge with the jungle and are one with it. They all form a part of her vast fecundity and seem like her beloved kith and kin, her beloved children. The jungle embraces the native population and they merge seamlessly, as if they were of the same element, but the European invaders are left out in the cold, and they resent her malevolence.

In the 'Heart of Darkness', the native people and the African jungles form a composite whole that is distinct and separate from the invaders. The jungle is portrayed as having a mind and personality of its own and is given a metaphysical dimension. It becomes surreal and larger-than-life, a powerful, if morally ambiguous female character who is almost limitless. The explorers seem to be pitted against this fertile and fecund female force, and Conrad uses terms like "silent", "patient" and "unapproachable" to describe her, as if she were a humongous cow, albeit a frightening one.

In the 'Heart of Darkness', Marlow says:

"...the woods were unmoved, like a mask--heavy, like the closed door of a prison, they looked with this air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence."

While the colonizers are in Africa to loot wealth and to get rich quick, the voyage turns out to be journey of self-discovery. For instance, Marlow discovers that all the honky-tonk he believed about racial superiority and being a spiritually enlightened race is shattered when he sees how the colonizers treat the African natives. His colonizing mindset is quickly led to self-doubt and delusion, then to hate and disgust. To this end, the jungles give birth to a new Marlow.

Thanks to the African jungle, Marlow discovers what he really is- a man clinging to the delusion of European civilization in the midst of the African wilderness. According to Jacques Berthoud (1978) Marlow's tryst with the darkness of the African jungles, is in reality, his discovery of his own inner darkness. Berthoud (1978) says:

"A journey into the jungle is also descent into man's history, a return to his primordial origins. The darkness into which Marlow ventures has a heart which can be found within his own breast."

(Berthoud, J., "Joseph Conrad-The Major Phase", 1978, pp 41- 63, Cambridge University Press)

One should not credit Marlow with too much, however. He remains resentful and paranoid throughout and continues to view the African wilderness as a malevolent force. In his own words,

"The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there-there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were-no, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it- this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one."

The people of Africa, whom Marlow found similar yet different from those he was more familiar with, seemed to him in the throes of his expedition like extensions of Nature's malevolent master plan. They all seemed to be working in tandem to finish off the invaders and there seemed to be a constant environment of fear. Post-colonial theorists have questioned the extent of this paranoia, which is so persistent that is extends even to the non-human entities in the story, such as the river and the jungle.

The female characters in the 'Heart of Darkness' are extensions of the jungle's fecundity and metaphysicality. None of them are portrayed very well in the book or given much thought or space. Conrad plays into some obscene racial and sexual stereotypes in the 'Heart of Darkness', and we see this best in his portrayals of the 'Young African Woman' and 'The Intended'. For instance, there is an occasion in the book where the young African woman is described thus:

"She came abreast of the steamer, stood still and faced us. Her long shadow fell to water's edge. Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose."

The young woman seems to epitomize all the malevolence Marlow spotted in Nature herself, and like Nature, also seems to have an 'inscrutable purpose'. She holds this within herself, like a terrible secret. Marlow's mad distrust of women, especially women of color, is rather obvious in his description of her, as is his condescension at her "wild" sorrow, her "dumb" pain and her "half-shaped" resolve.

Marlow feels the "flavor of mortality" when he travels to London to visit Kurtz's "Intended". There, he discovers that the "pall of gloom" he had felt in the African wilderness is in London, too. In fact, it exists within his own heart. Yet again, Marlow feels Nature's malevolence, though he is a million miles away from Africa. The 'Intended', like the 'Young African Woman' represents to Marlow the supernatural evil of the jungle which haunts him long after he has left Africa. Marlow begins to regard the dead Kurtz not only as a dead comrade but also as a wretched martyr who was consumed by the Forces Of Darkness. He is the metaphorical child who was consumed by the womb. In the "Heart of Darkness, Marlow says,

"The wilderness had found him out early, and had taken upon him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it 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 proved to be irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core."

It appears as though Marlow feels tamed by the jungle rather than the other way around. Ultimately, when Kurtz dies, he goes off stage, and is replaced by the resentful Marlow and his love-hate relationship with the natives as well as the seething African jungles in the background. Marlow has his own moment of epiphany with Kurtz's "Intended" when he remembers Kurtz's last words. These two words, inarticulate as they are, sum up Kurtz's entire experience of living in the African wilderness, and Marlow is reminded of them, when many miles away in London. "The Horror! The Horror!" the dying Kurtz had gasped. These words live to haunt Marlow for the rest of his life.

According to critic Terry Collitts (2006), 'Heart of Darkness' is itself a cynical book written during a period of political upheaval. It was written during the last stages of European Imperialism, and has the tone of a tragedy, depicting a world doomed to imminent ruin-morally if not materially. Collitts (2006) says:

"The powerful propaganda of Marlow's initial disgust at the wanton devastation wrought by European invaders is superseded by an increasing fascination with an "unspeakable" darkness. To put it another way, the linear river, which enables the "fantastic invasion" to take place and the loot to be brought back is bordered by an untamable "jungle", whose darkness can be read literally, metaphorically and allegorically."

(Collitts, T., 'Post-colonial Conrad- Paradoxes of Empire', 2006, Routledge , pp 84-123)

Through the fantastic invasion, Nature remains "an unspeakable darkness", voiceless, although her resentment and malevolence are felt even by the European colonizers. Kurtz's last words reaffirm to Marlow the chilling truth: that his friend fought Nature and lost.

It must be pointed out here that Conrad's view of human nature was that it was essentially bestial and when he spoke about man's descent into history, he implied man's descent into bestiality. However, this philosophy did not apply to womankind, and to Conrad, women were always 'Intended' to be objects of man's bestiality and plunder. If they had any such bestial inclinations themselves, Conrad was secure enough in his white-man patriarchy to put them properly in their places.

To people like Kurtz, the jungle was the ultimate test of their physical endurance and their mortality. While Kurtz is the ultimate Faustian archetype, coveting wealth and power, he is not the ultimate tragic hero, and the 'Heart of Darkness' is not a tragedy. That a man like Kurtz, himself a man with great darkness in his heart and who was considered an achiever by all the other colonizers should die so miserably, was indeed a sobering lesson for the rest of his ilk. All this is relevant in the light of Kurtz's untimely death, his love-hate relationship with the natives and the fecund depths of the African jungle in the background.

Kurtz alive was a man with few moral principles; he decapitated natives and displayed their heads on staves but was still considered a prodigy and an emissary of pity by the other colonizers, and of science and progress by Marlow. Kurtz held a similar antagonism towards Nature and his objective was statedly:

"...to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe."

'Heart of Darkness' uses morality as a variable to measure the effects of colonization, not only of one race over another but also of one sex over another.

When he explores the jungles of Africa like someone born to lead and gifted with divine wisdom, Marlow is simply asserting the confidence instilled in him since childhood coupled with his white superiority. Nothing shakes his confidence or offers him a reality check until Kurtz dies, and his merry delusion continues for a good while unabated until this realization.

In 'Heart of Darkness', the feminine is not just morally inferior, she is also in need of taming, and this is where the role of the colonizer becomes relevant. In Conrad's book, everyone except the colonizer is a child. The natives, male or female, are all children; the women, even the white ones, are children too. Only the colonizer has seen the world and only he knows right from wrong. To this end, he claims to legitimately earn the right to assert his moral opinion on the rest of the world.

It is important to remember that Conrad essentially believed that human civilization and culture were only facades, and man was hardly different from a beast. In the context of Marlow's journey of "self-discovery" amidst all the fecundity of the African jungles, he says:

"We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance to be subdued at the loss of profound anguish and of excessive toil."

According to critic and Indologist E. M Forster (1942), 'Heart of Darkness' was a less-than-extraordinary book simply because Kurtz was unable to articulate the nature of the horror he experienced in the African wilderness. Doing so would have caused him to introspect upon the grounds for his assumed racial and moral superiority and to evaluate the role of his own incompetency in his doom. But all this was obviously beyond him.

According to Leavis (1948), a constant critic of Conrad, the style in 'Heart of Darkness' resorts to 'adjectival insistence' as exemplified in the repetition of words such as, "inscrutable", "inconceivable", "unspeakable" and so on. Such terminology is used by Conrad to further ideological determinants and imperialist assumptions. Leavis notes that Conrad's language use, particularly his use of specific adjectives creates the perception that the African continent and its people is something distinct, inhuman, savage and difficult to communicate with.

Yet, despite being all these difficult things, in addition to being (as suggested) female and morally inferior, the jungles of Africa still exemplify that certain fecundity which make them a viable prospect for exploration by colonizers, thus furthering the colonial argument.

It is this flawed argument that has been duly criticized in this paper.

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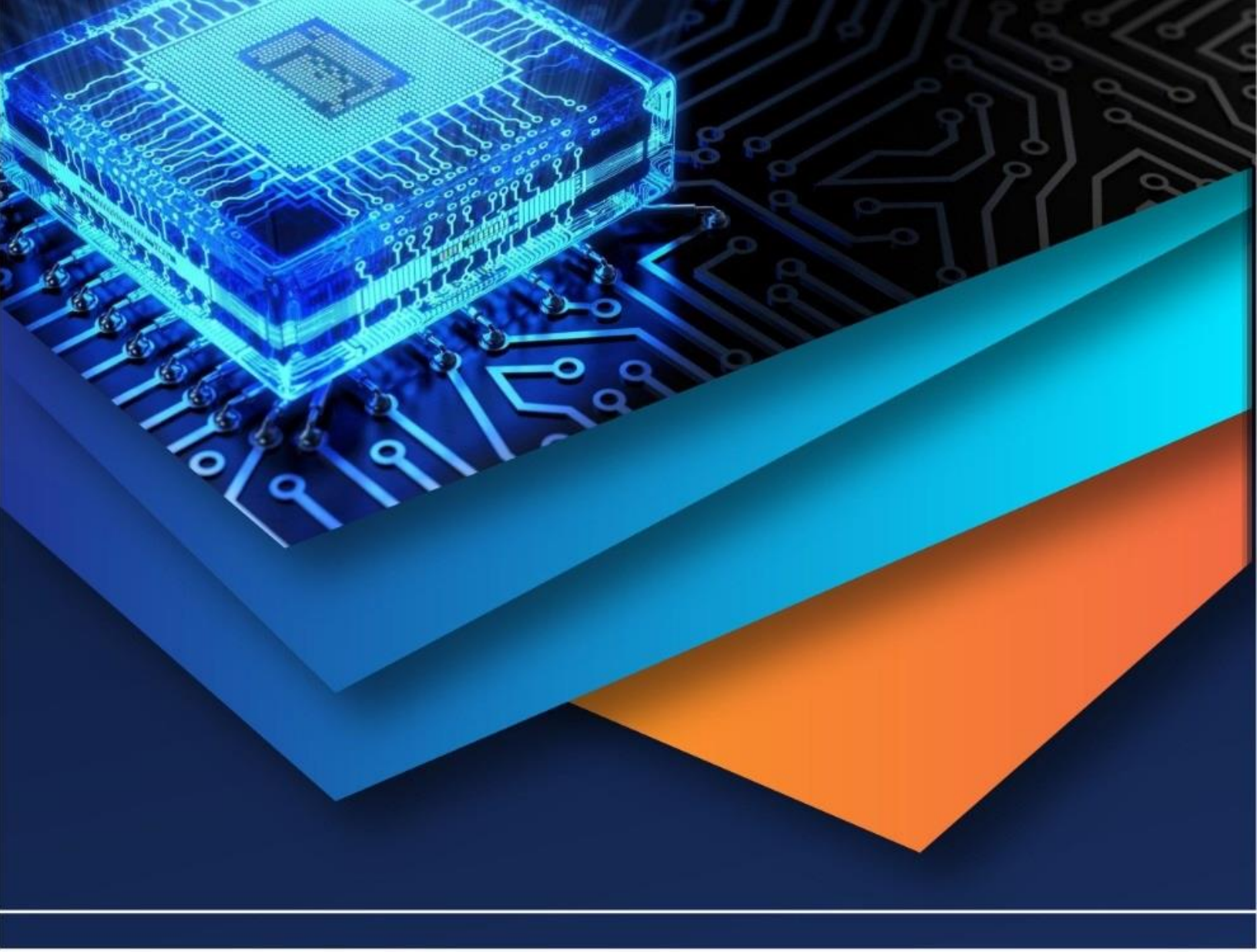

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