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Tracing the Postcolonial-Ecological Schema: A Reading of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*

Abstract—This paper tries to locate the ab/use of nature and culture of the colonized land, and at the same time it also tries to trace how this ab/use contributes in the territorial expansion. The article is based on the readings of two texts with colonialism as their backdrop, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and its cinematic adaptation, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. The very idea of darkness associated with Africa has been a colonial construct and the colossal forests of Africa were one of the few reasons behind such political construction. In the celluloid version the deployment of arms and ammunitions to foster violence disturb the natural harmony of Vietnam. The text and the movie suggest that the imperial adventure and subsequent experiences make colonial settlers realise the existing 'darkness' of their hearts. The reiteration of various stereotypes associated with an 'alien' land through characters like Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, show that the idea of adventure tale is not as innocent as it is presented. On the contrary, it has deep political and imperial undertones. Both the text and the movie show how colonisers' cruelty is not limited to the natives but is extended to the nature and culture of the 'other' land. The present paper attempts an ecocritical reading of the novella and the film to discuss what role colonialism played in the ecocide of the native land and dehumanization of natives.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, (Post)colonialism, Nature-Culture Binary, Adventure tale*

Ecocriticism tries to evaluate the depiction of nature in texts and shows how the (re)presentation of physical environment and nature in various forms of literature is not as innocent as it seems. The present paper tries to explore how the colonizers ab/used the ecology of the native land to appropriate their claims about cultural superiority denigrating the indigenous culture as 'primitive' or less rational to validate their colonial expansion. In the recent past, Ecocriticism has been an important area of study which not only tries to build an

ecological awareness but also fosters (re)reading major of literary works. Nature has been an integral part of literature since time immemorial varying from Shakespearean comedies where we sought upon nature for reconciliation of complications depicted in the plays, to the romantic poetry where we find a picture of benign nature in Keats, Wordsworth and their likes. However, in texts with (post)colonial concerns, a variation can be noticed in the portrayal of nature which comprises land/ natural resources/ natives/ rituals etc. Colonizers, under the false cloak of ‘civilising’ mission’ in the ‘Other’ land depicted nature not only as dark, negative and gothic but they also harmed the ecology, which not only comprised of trees and forests but also of certain rare species.

Modern age narratives of adventure tales and travelogues about colonial expeditions were heavily loaded with preconceived notions towards the alien land. In such tales, the protagonist impregnated with a biased perspective of his/ her ‘home’ tried to narrate the story of an alien land in terms of its Otherness,’ and hence any departure from the expected scenario appeared ‘unnatural’ to him. The postcolonial criticism along with ecocriticism analyses the idea of nostalgic view of return to the unspoiled nature in order to restore a lost simplicity which has been manipulated by the colonial settlers. The present paper tries to discuss the (mis)treatment of nature during such expeditions with special reference to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and its cinematic adaptation, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* though marked with a slight difference. The novella *Heart of Darkness* is based on colonial expedition in Congo, a large area in Central Africa while the cinematic adaptation, *Apocalypse Now*(1979),is set during the Vietnam War (1955- 1975). Though the film and novella are set in two different geographical locations but my paper takes into account the

socio-political turmoil which are quite similar and the central idea of the novella has been given due recognition by Coppola in his movie. The text and the film have nature as one of the motifs in the plethora of themes that run throughout the novella and the film. In this paper, I will try to read the novella and the movie ecocritically to explore what role colonialism played in the ecocide of the native land.

The disturbing sound of a helicopter ravishing the aura of a palm forest with sudden bombardment marks the opening scene of the movie *Apocalypse Now*. The soothing sight of palm trees suddenly transforms into blazing fire and a song is played in the backdrop symbolising violence and destruction. The song is the “End” by Jim Morrison and here I quote the lyrics:

This is the end, beautiful friend
This is the end, my only friend, the end
Of our elaborate plans, the end
Of everything that stands, the end
No safety or surprise, the end
I'll never look into your eyes again.

(Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*)

In the novella, the title itself marks the biased viewpoint of colonizers as African land is called the ‘heart of darkness’ due to its deep and dense forests. Marlow views the local jungles as “the edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black” (Conrad 14). Further, the river Thames is juxtaposed with the African river Congo and in this equation Thames is shown as the lifeline of England whereas river Congo is described as the “*immense snake uncoiled*”(Conrad 8 my emphasis). Such description exemplifies the aberrance manifested in the ecology (both flora and fauna) of Africa. Thus the novella largely depicts the African land and its prodigious jungle in a predisposed vocabulary embedded in the

European imagination while the cinematic adaptation tries to lead us to the belief that nature is something to be mastered for 'perfection'.

The adventure tale tradition overdrawn with the theme of exploring the unexplored space of 'wilderness' gave colonisers an undue advantage of politicising the narrative in their interests and one example of such lingual politics is visible in the postcolonial counter narrative to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* i. e. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. At the end of *Things Fall Apart*, we come across the title of the colonial narrative by the district commissioner based on protagonist's (Okonkwo) tragic death as, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*(Achebe 148). This particular sentence depicts the inherent politics in narrating from a dominant position where one who wields the pen, seizes history and a place in dominant historiography. However in this process the 'other' side of the narrative is obfuscated beyond repair.

The idea of adventure and exploration are quite vibrant in the cinema, *Apocalypse Now* as well, where helicopters, ships, army bases etc. stand as the equipment of desired political expedition. On the other hand in the novella, we see the rawness of African nature which is not understood by the colonial settlers and hence they try to inflict their culture on African land and natives but ironically they themselves are lost in that space of 'wilderness' of the land which is bottomless. Marlow says:

Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel very small very lost. (Conrad39)

Kurtz is attracted by these qualities of the land and he travels to the interiors of the forest with a hope to master it. But he himself becomes a part of that 'darkness.' He is charmed by the snake. Kurtz actually symbolises the European culture and hence Marlow, or the Europe, needs to regain the 'lost' culture from that space of darkness. The refined European exterior and European mind is symbolised by Charlie Marlow and he is on an endeavour to safeguard the European culture "on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy" (Conrad 40).

The movie, *Apocalypse Now* exhibits the nature-culture dichotomy extensively. We frequently see images where landscapes and local inhabitants are harmed by bombarding and firings. They not only try to penetrate the envisaged darkness of nature in Vietnam by waging a war, but also master it by using coercive means. Helicopters marked as 'Death From Above', armour, steamers, and satellite phones are not only equipment of war but also symbols of a 'culture', a 'civilization' which gives the American soldiers the sense of being 'superior and civilized' against the natives of the land, that's why captain Kilgore calls Vietnamese "slopes". When the companion chef in the boat goes out to search for mangoes and is attacked by a tiger, he says, "never get out of the boat" (*Apocalypse Now*). Marlow (who is named Captain Benjamin L. Willard in the movie) in extension to the speech says "Kurtz got off the boat, he split from the whole programme" (*Apocalypse Now*). They realize the difference between themselves and Kurtz. The senior officer in the beginning, while directing Marlow for his mission explains about Kurtz as "temptation to be god because there is a conflict in every heart between rational and irrational, good and evil; sometimes dark side overcomes" (*Apocalypse Now*). How ironic it is that his evil desire and temptation to be 'god' are blamed upon the wilderness of Vietnam.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, various symbols like forests, river Congo, natives etc. are all clothed with stereotypes of racist and colonial ideologies. Marlow in his journey meets a European accountant and describes him as:

I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing. 'I shook hands with this miracle. He had come out for a moment, he said, 'to get a breath of fresh air. The expression sounded wonderfully odd'. (Conrad 20)

The accountant symbolises culture and Marlow is amazed to find a European man who, unlike Kurtz, is not lost in the wilderness of Africa. However, the second part of the speech is more debatable where 'a breath of fresh air' in the land of 'rioted vegetation' appears 'odd' to Marlow. Their constructed African 'darkness' rules their consciousness to such an extent that they find the alien land not worthy even of fresh air. Marlow's comment suggests as if a breath of fresh air can exist only on the European soil. The other important element used in the text is the physical and bodily details of the natives which are highly offensive and such description heightens the cultural derogation. One such example of dehumanising description is when Marlow describes an African man as "a black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns antelope horns, I think-on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked Fiend like enough" (74).

Language used in the novella to describe the native shows colonisers' overtly driven contradiction between the civilized human and abhorrent animality. Such narration only serves to unravel the colonial hypocrisy behind 'civilising mission'. In another incident, we

see a native girl being described as “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent”(Conrad 68-69). Marlow’s speeches regarding the African ecology and natives are extremely biased and racist, he calls travelling to the land as going back to the “prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet” (Conrad 40), “the living trees, lashed together by the creepers” (Conrad 44), “there was no joy in brilliance of sunshine” (Conrad 37). Such phrases show the disrespect towards the ‘other’ land and ecology. Although at last, Marlow realized that it’s not nature or ecology of Africa which is dark, but the human heart behind the desire of territorial expansion.

Although set in a different time and space, Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* resembles Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* almost entirely—only the ending of the movie is different. At the end the movie when Marlow (Captain Benjamin L. Willard in the film) travels to meet Kurtz, he asks his companions to keep their hands off from armours and in this way Marlowe (Captain Benjamin L. Willard) with his men enters the mystic world where Kurtz is conceived as a ‘god’. It’s interesting to notice how Marlow’s (Captain Benjamin L. Willard) companion L.B Johnson adapts admirably in accordance with the lifestyle of local tribe. He puts paint on his face, makes certain strange sounds and also wears tribal clothes to join the dancing rituals. The resting place of Kurtz too is gothic and we come across three books on his table; *Holy Bible*, *Ritual to Romance* and Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. Kurtz succumbs to the heavy mute spell of the unfathomable wilderness of the land he came to acquire. Kurtz says to Marlow (Captain Benjamin L. Willard) in the cinema that “it’s judgement that defeats us” (*Apocalypse Now*). Perhaps they realize the truth of human nature. The judgement towards the land and ecology as primitive and savage by them, the colonisers, is what defeats Kurtz

and other colonisers as they succumb to the wilderness of Vietnam or Africa. Frazer's *Golden Bough* is symbolic of vegetation and related rituals and the last scene of the movie alludes to the vegetation myth of *Golden Bough*. In the last scene of the movie, the tribal dance and the killing of *Carabao* (water buffalo) are parts of the sacrifice made to the almighty for fertility of the land. Coppola contrasts the Vietnam tribe and armoured Americans by offering us representative rituals of each culture: the sacrifice of the *Carabao* and the Playboy Bunny show in American military base. The killing of Kurtz is parallel to the killing of *Carabao* as both Kurtz and *Carabao* need to be sacrificed to metaphorically restore the fertility of land exploited by colonial settlers. Hence, the tribal society represents an order lost in the West and foregrounds the nature – culture dichotomy. Kurtz, in the movie, reads the lines from Eliot's "Hollowmen" which is a symbol of barrenness and infertility and that's why his killing is symbolic of restoration of ecology. Marlow (Captain Benjamin L. Willard) with his friend returns from the "Heart of Darkness", may be, with a realization of difference between both the lands, between primitive yet cultivated nature and civilized yet corrupt culture.

Marlow in the novella says that "the prehistoric man was cursing us praying to us welcoming us- who could tell?" (Conrad 40), a statement which imparts a sense of alienation of the colonisers in the African land. Hence their judgement is nothing but the (mis)reading under their false consciousness of 'superiority'. To symbolise evil we have been using colour black and to symbolise good we use colour white but the problem with such representation system is that it has entrenched so much into our consciousness that someone or something which is black becomes synonymous to evil. Earlier evil was black but now Black is evil and similar is the case in the (mis)understanding of alien nature by the colonial settlers. In the

text, black and dark serve as the equivalent for the barbaric and dehumanised natives and land. The immense wilderness of Africa or Vietnam is not understood by the colonisers and hence they tag it as black, evil, heart of darkness. Kurtz in the novella says “my intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my” (Conrad 54). This statement shows his desire to possess the natural resources of the other land. His African mistress too embodies the same femininity we find in nature. In the novella, Kurtz imagines to “exterminate all the brutes” (Conrad 56) and also in the movie Kurtz’s notes say “drop the bomb, exterminate them all” (*Apocalypse Now*). However, ironically Kurtz himself is exterminated. The unfathomable ecology of the African land only seems to mock at the human endeavour to civilize, rather destroy, the enigmatic wilderness of the land. Hence, the Vietnamese tribe is a coherent society in which man and nature are united through ritual.

The nature is benign and it has peace and solace deep rooted in her but if you try to harness her, she will hit you back. It’s not as if the helicopters, satellite phones and armours symbolise cultural evils but it is actually the usage which makes them coercive means. Culture too is apart of nature and through culture alone we understand nature. But it is the conflict between human and nature, culture and nature where the issue lies. Thinking nature to be ‘feminine’ (that is inferior to man’) and trying to master her will lead us nowhere. This tussle to prove superiority over or alienation from nature will ultimately prove to be self-defeating.

In conclusion, it can be argued that without honouring the man- nature harmony, the reasoning modernist/imperialist mind has tried to segregate nature and master her, and the two texts reflect the same destructive will. The colonial expansion not only politicised the

cultural understanding of the society and nature but also damaged the psyche of native and ecology of the colonised land. The idea of ecocriticism somewhere allows us to study the political undertones behind colonial mission which not only adds to the existing scholarship but also gives us enough space to research for forward-thinking criticism in the postcolonial-ecological schema.

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