



**DE-SPIRITED NATURE AND THE ENLIGHTENED MAN: AN ECOLOGICAL
CRITIQUE OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS***

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Abstract

*Joseph Conrad, one of the most celebrated writers of modernity, is known for his impressionistic depictions of the encounter between man and Nature in different exotic settings of the globe during the colonial project carried out by the European colonizers. It is interesting to note however that Conrad's writing anachronistically fits into the basic theoretical premises proposed by the recently evolved critical paradigm of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, as we all know, questions the thoroughgoing anthropocentric worldview introduced to the world by the Enlightenment—a worldview in which man posits himself as the centre of the universe while considering Nature as a life-less, spirit-less, peripheral object. In the light of the above theoretical inputs, this article intends to analyze Joseph Conrad's magnum opus *Heart of Darkness* in the light of ecocriticism's critique of a human-centered worldview.*

Key Words: *Ecocriticism, Enlightenment, anthropocentrism, colonialism, Renaissance*



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In the modern province occupied of the Enlightened man, Nature no more remains a vibrant entity (as it used to be in animistic cultures), but has turned into an entity that is mute, lifeless and dispirited. It must also be understood that Nature's uncharacteristic silence is imposed on it by the Enlightenment which unjustly attributed man with a masterful status in the universal scheme of things. Renaissance and the Enlightenment induced anthropocentric humanism has camouflaged the process of Nature with its cultural dictums, imperatives, and motifs. Ecocriticism, as a critical practice, explores the genealogy of this silence of Nature. In

Christopher Manes' words: "In particular, this approach requires that I consider how Nature has grown silent in our discourse, shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object" (17). Man, instead of accepting himself to be a diminutive element of Nature, considers himself to be its master because in his estimation Nature is no more than a mute and vapid entity. Presuming Nature to be a mute, vapid and stagnant entity, man represents Nature according to his own whims and fancies in his socio-cultural practices. In other words, Nature becomes a 'construct' by the social man as it becomes what Georg Lukacs would call "a societal category" (234). It must not be forgotten at this juncture that the anti-Nature principles of The Enlightenment and also the Western philosophical tradition have contributed significantly towards such dehumanization of Nature.

Such negative attitude of man towards Nature finds best expression in Joseph Conrad's colonial fiction *Heart of Darkness*. The novel, Conrad's magnum opus, not only exhibits the derogatory and disdainful attitude that Conrad's colonial characters harbor towards Nature; but also elicits the anti-Nature principles of Western philosophy. Based on these precepts, this article endeavours to explore, with reference to the anti-Nature principles of the Western philosophical tradition, how the image of Nature is constructed in a negative way by the Western colonial explorers in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

From the very beginning of the journey into the African land in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, his colonial man conceives of the venture as a movement into the realms of the "other." He perceives Nature as being silent, gloomy, and devoid of spirit. At the very outset, the narrator describes the scenario by the River Thames on the coast of London as:

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, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth. (Conrad, *Heart* 1)

The 'otherisation' of Nature is evident from Marlow's description of the natural vista in Gravesend. As is evident from Marlow's delineations, Nature, with its "gleams of vanished spirits" (Conrad, *Heart* 1), is "enframed" in the imaginary canvas of stagnation. Further, the narrator's account that the air brooding motionless over London has become "condensed into a mournful gloom" (Conrad, *Heart* 1) espouses the colonial man's conceptualization of Nature as a stark embodiment of spiritlessness. Such apathetic description of Nature shows that man portrays

Nature in the way he conceives of it or in other words, Nature finds an expression through his imagination, cognition, and verbalisation. In sharp contrast to the animistic cultures, which see the natural world as being inspirited and 'inert' entities such as stones and rivers as being articulate and intelligible subjects, the colonial culture sees Nature as being quiet, inert, and dumb. As has been mentioned earlier, the spirit of this denigrating attitude towards Nature is deeply embedded in the long history of the Western ideological and discursive formations. In a notorious protestation of the inertness of Nature, the Western philosopher Descartes affirms: "There exists 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, *Feminism* 104).

In addition, Descartes looks at it as a 'machine' which is passive and can be easily moulded and controlled where the knowledge of its operation is the means to power over it. In the paradigm of scientific materialism, Nature is nullified and defined as 'lack.' It is seen as non-agentic, passive, non-creative, and inert and can be set into motion only when external force is applied to it. It is non-mindful being mere stuff, mere matter, devoid of any characteristics of mind and thought. Lacking goals and purposes of its own, it is non-teleological and non-conative and hence, "has to be given a telos by human action" (Scott 14). Hence, men are to fill the empty space of Nature with their own intentionalities that finally leads to what Timothy Oakes calls "spatial colonization" (509). Thus mechanistically conceived, Nature lies open to the imposition of man's purposes and his treatment of it as an instrument for the achievement of his satisfaction.

It should be emphasised here that not only the Cartesian dualism, but also the Newtonian atomistic cosmology has a significant role to play in the culmination of a thoroughly mechanistic world-view of Nature. The deadness of matter, in the mechanistic scheme of things, robs man of his respect for Nature. In the era of pre-scientific thought, Nature had been opulently endowed with attributes of spirit and agency. The mechanistic point of view, spirited by the Newtonian atomistic cosmology, however, has made it an insidious principle that Nature consists of insensate, drab matters devoid of interests and purposes. This draining-off of spirit from matter is naturally expressed in mind-matter dualism. Man's mind has to become the repository of spirit since Nature has become the arena of blind matter in motion. Lamenting on the disastrous effect

of a thoroughly mechanistic world-view of Nature propelled by the Newtonian atomistic cosmology on man's relation with Nature, Freya Mathews writes:

What do we feel when we gaze into the dark Newtonian abyss, with its mathematical march of inanimate atoms? The illusoriness of human aspirations? The 'blindness' and awesome 'reducibility' of Nature, before which human warmth and worth appears as phantoms, illusions, creatures of the mind-that-cannot-see-into-the-things-in-themselves? . . . It is a chilling experience, this peering over the brink of appearance into the Newtonian void, yet it is one which is imposed on us virtually from infancy. (38)

From Marlow's descriptive perceptions of African Nature in *Heart of Darkness*, the readers get enough glimpses of the reflection of the anti-Nature traits of the Western philosophy that devalue Nature by portraying it as a mute, deaf and speechless matter and being empty of significance. Marlow's use of expressions like "empty land" (Conrad, *Heart* 21), "the silence of the land" (Conrad, *Heart* 29) shows how he conceives of the land as being a mute and silent "other" making it no more than a "dark Newtonian abyss," (38) as Freya Mathews would call it.

Devoid of life and vitality then, Nature becomes a mute object meant for being invaded by men. Marlow, for instance, sees Nature as an object ready for being invaded by the colonisers as he says: "And outside, the silent wilderness [was] waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (Conrad, *Heart* 26). Evidently, Nature like a mute and helpless entity is made to wait patiently to become just a prey for this "fantastic invasion" by the intruding colonisers.

The fact that Nature is derogated as a mute and silent other is further reinforced by Marlowe's description of the African forest as a mute and silent entity. His disquieting encounter with the primitive Nature is expressed explicitly as:

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)

Among different forms of the "otherisation" of Nature, a major one is modern man's perception of it as a manifestation of primitivity, fairly antithetical to his urban values. Marlow conceptualises his encounter with Nature as a confrontation of the modern colonial man against its atavistic existence.

This passage gives ample evidence of the alliance of Nature with "primitivity" as opposed to the refined, cultured values of the European colonisers who proclaim themselves to be civilised enough to be separate from primeval Nature. Marlow gets disturbed by the "smell of mud, of primeval mud" in his nostrils and is dumbfounded by the "high stillness of the primeval forest" that is "great, expectant, mute," "a dumb thing" and that "couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well" (Conrad, *Heart* 30). Clearly, he sees Nature as a mute entity without any pulsating presence.

The estrangement of Nature also takes place on the basis of temporality, one among the various forms of its otherisation. Marlow realises that entering the realms of African Nature is an experience of traveling back in time. "Going up the river," he says, "was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on earth and big trees were kings" (Conrad, *Heart* 39). Further, Marlow describes that being "bewitched and cut off for ever from everything . . . [they] had known once" (Conrad, *Heart* 39) and from "the comprehension of . . . [their] surroundings," the colonisers "glided past like phantoms" (Conrad, *Heart* 41) into "another existence perhaps" (Conrad, *Heart* 39). Their corporal as well as psychological apartness from Nature becomes intensified from the fact that they trace themselves in another existence far away from the realms of civilisation as Marlow recounts: "We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were traveling in the night of first ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories" (Conrad, *Heart* 41-42). The supposition of man's estrangement from Nature further deepens when Marlow realises that they are "wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet . . . taking possession of an accursed inheritance" (Conrad, *Heart* 41). Nature becomes "prehistoric" and "an accursed inheritance" for the colonisers clearly suggesting the repulsive attitude they harbour towards it.

In this context of the “otherisation” of Nature through diverse forms, it is learnt that the cultural sophistications of man always deforms the real presence of Nature and present it in an entirely distorted way as shown above. In such a scenario, Catriona Sandilands throws ample light on how the “Real environment” is camouflaged and estranged from man by his self-made cultural environment. She 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 pure difference or exotic alterity, not only the Real; nature has a cultural presence at the same time as this presence is not all that it is. The real runs through nonhuman nature as it runs through humanity, but strangeness is a constant, anarchic part of both realms. (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, it finds expression only through man’s comprehension, his language and culture tainted by racist, sexist and colonialist biases. So, Nature always becomes a social product, an “artifact” of the power-game of the social man against Nature as N. Smith allegedly points out: “Nature is nothing if it is not social” (30). To authenticate man’s exertion of power to tame and control it, it has to be portrayed as feral, savage, and antithetical to him. Biased by the colonialist ideology of eurocentrism, Marlow sees African Nature as “the gloomy circle of an Inferno” (Conrad, *Heart* 17), an “overheated catacomb” (Conrad, *Heart* 14), “another existence” (Conrad, *Heart* 39), “prehistoric earth,” “an unknown planet” (Conrad, *Heart* 41), “a strange world of plants, and water and silence” (Conrad, *Heart* 39), “an unrestful and noisy dream” (Conrad, *Heart* 39) and a “grimy fragment of another world” (Conrad, *Heart* 83) that evidently shows how the social man, being valorised by his language, culture and the so-called rational mind intends to “otherise” the impulse, the spirit and the body of the non-human Nature. In this encounter with the ineffable Real, the hypocritical littleness of man’s culture and language is thoroughly exposed. David Delaney in his influential article “Making Nature/Marking Humans: Law as a Site of Cultural Production” discusses explicitly how by ignoring the “Real” presence of Nature, man uses it just as a concept or an idea or a metaphor for the social construction of reality. He is of the view: “The Nature that is constructed is a concept, a category, an idea, a set of conventionalized metaphors, and a trope for differentiation. It is a culturally available conceptual resource for

making sense of reality” (490). The “material sublime” (Oerlemans 4) of the somatic presence of Nature is camouflaged by the sheer artificiality of Marlow’s constructed narrative and its material abundance is debased through the biased representation of his self-acclaimed mental projections. For Marlow, the ‘core’ of the physical world of Nature is characterised by a ‘non-human’ distinctiveness and he, being a civilised European, is an absolute outsider to the non-human Nature, having his thought and existence estranged from its physical presence. His inability to grasp the ‘material sublime’ of Nature fully through his senses leads to an arousal of a farrago of mixed emotions of awe, wonder and fear for Nature, the “other” to culture. A significant impetus behind this thesis lies in the exploration of how the colonialist’s vision of Nature is tainted by an isolated cultural consciousness that always sees Nature as a cultural ‘other’ ignoring its intrinsic material essence. Similarly in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow uses Nature just as a metaphor for the description of the negative dimensions of the universe by seeing it as “inhuman” and often contrasting it with the category of the “man” where the contextualisation of Nature is done on the basis of externality (wilderness) and animality (bestiality). Nature, therefore, “possesses a negative valence and is seen as a forlorn, barren, unimproved site or as a cruel and savage place lacking any moral code” and hence, Nature and civilisation have “always been counter-posed” (Proctor 356).

It should be duly emphasised here that association of Nature with a miasma of melancholy and tragedy becomes another significant tactic of its “otherisation.” Kris Fresonke, in his article “Is Nature Necessary,” provides a radically unusual and interesting reading of Coleridge’s poetry where he reveals Coleridge himself finding nothing tragic or forlorn in Nature; rather he confirms that it is man who enforces a note of melancholia onto it so as to excogitate it as a tragic “other.” Coleridge, in his poem “The Nightingale,” says: “In nature there is nothing melancholy,/But some night-wandering Man . . . he and such as he/First nam’d these notes a melancholy strain” (517). Evidently, what Coleridge conveys here is that the tragic and melancholic elements of Nature are nothing but maneuvered projections of man’s fantasies onto it. In a similar fashion, Marlow faces not only a silent but also a tragic Nature in Africa, as he readily traces an “inexplicable note of desperate grief” in the grievous “savage clamour” of Nature in Africa that swept the colonisers across the “river bank” and the “blind whiteness of the fog” (Conrad, *Heart* 49). The insurmountable grief of Nature manifests before Marlow like a “fact”—a “fact dazzling” like “the foam on the depths of the sea,” like “a ripple on an

unfathomable enigma” (Conrad, *Heart* 49) of Nature. The “fact” that Marlow assertively discovers in the diverse elements of Nature is the verity of Nature’s tragic figure that offers no joy for man, but only inexplicable bereavement and despair. Such a projection of an aura of tragedy onto Nature on the part of Marlow spells out how man dehumanises it by associating notes of tragedy, anathema, and melancholy with the savagery of Nature. Further, the wilderness of Nature and the sophistication of civilisation are persistently counterpoised by seeing Nature as a spiteful and bestial place lacking any moral code, a hopeless and dark antithesis to culture. The wilderness of African Nature along with its land, river, jungle, the arch of its blazing sky appears to Marlow as being dark, bleak and impenetrable as he says: “I looked around, and I don’t know why, but I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness” (Conrad, *Heart* 67).

Moreover, he feels African Nature to be a prison in which they are entrapped as he contemplates: “The woods were unmoved, like a mask—heavy, like the closed door of a prison—they looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence” (Conrad, *Heart* 69). Evidently, Marlow and the colonisers feel as if they are aliens to the world of Nature and have come from another world as the multitudes of trees look at them as if they are strangers to each other. Elucidating such a feeling of severance, Marlow describes:

The long reaches that were like one and the same reach, monotonous bends that were exactly alike, slipped past the steamer with their multitude of secular trees looking patiently after this grimy fragment of another world, the forerunner of change, of conquest, of trade, of massacres . . .” (Conrad, *Heart* 83)

The colonisers, being the “forerunner[s] of change, of conquest, of trade, of massacre” (Conrad, *Heart* 83) encroach into the realm of Nature to conquer it and to massacre it for the purpose of trade and commercial benefits that shows their inhuman treatment of Nature as an insignificant “other” whom they can use, conquer and kill at their will for their personal, material benefits. The fact that the coloniser sees Nature as a “passive object of imperial commerce” (McCarthy 620) is further strengthened by the notion that he wants to use it as a commodity for commercial purposes as he does not hesitate to kill the elephants and procure the ivory without any moral compunction. Confirming this selfish and exploiting intention to be the driving force

behind the act of colonisation, Marlow asserts: “The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages” (Conrad, *Heart* 27). This is a clear case of the disrespectful treatment of Nature and its animals (like elephants) and their usage for sheer personal and commercial benefits.

The concept of “deep ecology” heralded by Arne Naess and many ecofeminists establishes substantially the recognition and acceptance of ‘intrinsic value’ in all aspects of the world of Nature. A consciousness of this value is inculcated by an ethical consciousness of what Naess calls the “biospherical egalitarianism” (56) that believes in the extension of man’s sense of self to encompass the place in which he exists and the “other” beings with which he lives. David Abram writes in this context: “The world and I reciprocate one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn” (33). Conradian narrators and protagonists clearly fail to envisage the positive significance of the above-mentioned “biospherical egalitarianism” and therefore, find themselves outcasts from the biosphere resulting in their inevitable alienation and suffering. In Marlow’s narration, the response of Nature, as Abram calls it, is suppressed and the devoiced Nature is perceived only through his biased constructions tainted by his masculine, colonialist ideology.

Alan Liu’s poignant remark that “there is no nature” (104) demonstrates the dangerous notion that there is no plausible conception of Nature without pre-existing ideological frameworks, a fixation that poses a potential threat of the methodical devaluation of Nature. This echoes the voices of critics like Neil Evernden who are aware of the fact that Nature always begins as a concept and its pure materiality first passes through the screen of culture and consciousness. Evernden, therefore, calls for the avoidance of the “conceptual domestication of nature” (116), which completely subdues it to man’s imagination. A postmodern critic like Baudrillard, conversely, would like to say how man has made Nature an insignificant ‘waste.’ He laments:

Nature—the natural world—is becoming residual, insignificant, an encumbrance, and we do not know how to dispose of it. By producing highly centralized structures, highly developed urban, industrial and technical systems, by remorselessly condensing down programmes, functions and models, we are transforming all the rest into waste, residues, useless relics. (78)

From Marlow's narration, the reader readily recognises that his narrative has the power of language and consciousness over the material. Keeping in tune with this, Drummond Bone states: ". . . the action of thought can be conceived of as an attack on the freedom of the object. . . . The desire to explain is close to transform the specific to the general, the material to the ideal, and indeed it may be identical to it if we exist within such dualistic terminology" (10). One of the objectives of this thesis is to demystify this mode of power that moulds the representation of physical Nature to its will. Thus, it propounds a 'green' mode of reading' which aims at critiquing the ideologically-oriented appropriation of the earth, the sea, the mountains and all elements of the non-human Nature that has engrossed the Western thinking so deeply. In other words, such a "green" reading emphasises on man's onus to discern the "thingness" or "being" of the non-human Nature as an epistemological and ontological existence. The ideological boundaries between words and things have to be abolished so as to free Nature from the bondage of the ideological incarceration of language and such an endeavour echoes the romantic critic Coleridge's words ". . . I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of words & things . . ." (qtd. in Griggs 156).

The pioneers of animal liberation like Peter Singer believe that the Western discursive practices have rendered the prerogative of moral consideration only to those sentient beings who are capable of feelings like pleasure or pain. Singer conjectures that the failure on the part of man to value the moral standing of the non-human Nature into equal consideration with that of humans is a form of prejudiced confirmation of what he calls "speciesism" (7). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's "man-speciesism" has been the major tool for the "otherisation" of Nature.

The colonialists suffer from an inevitable sense of self-imposed isolation by cutting themselves off from the rich perceptual possibilities of contact with Nature. Subsequently, their experiences become less diverse as they are less able to see and appreciate the biotic diversity of the space of Nature in which they are posited. R. Pyle writes in this context: ". . . we grow increasingly alienated, less caring, more apathetic. Such collective anomie allows further extinctions and deeper impoverishment of experience, round and round" (18). In *Heart of Darkness*, the colonisers continually fall under the spell of such an apathetic alienation from Nature and fail to recognise its vivacious presence.

In the context of the "otherisation" of Nature in various forms, critical geography shows how nature is constructed as an "other" space by the cultural man and how this other space (that

is, Nature) has become expressive of the prevailing ideological and the political relationships of power. Space theorist H. Lefebvre, in his essay “Reflections of the Politics of Space,” writes: “Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies” (31). Space becomes the medium through which culture is reproduced and conversely, culture, in Lefebvre’s terms, is instrumental in “the production of space” (qtd. in Gruenewald 629). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow’s narrative, imbued with and penetrated by the political and ideological forces of eurocentrism, constructs the African land and Nature as an “other” space, a site where the socio-political and ideological forces of eurocentrism unfolds, and by creating it as an other space, Marlow intends to affirm his cultural superiority of European civilisation as opposed to the atavistic presence of African Nature.

In the final analysis, this article makes a keen observation of the denigration of Nature as a non-human “other” by the Western colonisers as is evidently seen in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The denigration, so to say, has its roots in the Western philosophical history. The article, with the help of the recently evolving theoretical inputs of ecocriticism, analyses the intricate mechanism of this anthropocentric denigration of Nature as calls for a change in attitude on the part of man towards Nature and advocates a change in perception of man towards Nature thereby seeing it as a lively presence instead of looking down on it as a mute and lifeless entity.

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