

Nature as Woman and Woman as Nature: The Eco-sexual Politics of Colonization in  
Joseph Conrad's Fiction

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Conceived as a feminine principle, nature is equally lover, mother and virago: a source of sensual delight, a nurturing bosom, a site of treacherous and vindictive forces bent on retribution for her human violation.

~Kate Soper, What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human

Ecofeminism, an offshoot of ecocriticism and a term coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, divulges the anti-woman and anti-Nature practices interwoven in the Western ideological systems, fashioned mainly by the Platonic, Aristotelian and the Jewish-Christian tradition. Tracing the symbolic connections between the "twin dominations of women and nature" (Davion 234) by patriarchy, this critical practice has its vantage point in the segmentation of the society positing man at the apex and women, Nature and animals at the bottom. Closely resembling and corroborating the functioning of other age old Manichean binary oppositions such as culture/nature, reason/unreason and mind/body, this dualism is instrumental in the validation of woman and Nature as inferior "sexualities" and the substantiation of their systematized seclusion from man and his culture.

Feminisation of Nature and naturalisation of woman act as the colonial master's implicit but extensive modus operandi of this form of colonization, as evidently observed in Joseph Conrad's late Nineteenth Century narration including An Outcast of the Islands, Almayer's Folly and Heart of Darkness. The contour of this designed segregation operates through diverse bigoted precepts in which woman and Nature are analogously seen either as antithetical and threatening "others" to man

or as potential sites of ambiguity, dubiousness and treachery or as feeble sexes destined to be tamed and conquered by the male world. In this context, this paper intends to explore and unravel the intricate mechanism of this discriminatory masculine practice that is contributory to the dehumanization of Nature as an ignoble, feminine “other” and on the reverse, that of female as a naturally subordinate sex.

The European colonizer-protagonist Willems, in An Outcast of the Islands, is baffled by the untamed, atavistic obtrusiveness of the non-European female bodies of both the native woman and Nature who, as menacing “others” to him and also as metonymic reciprocations of each other, flummox his arrogated cultural superiority. The native Malayan lady Aissa, an embodiment of Nature, and thereby reflecting “the very spirit of the land of mysterious forests” appears mystically through its “forbidden gloom” (Conrad, An Outcast of the Islands 61). The forest, thus, patently manifests itself through its substitutive woman-presence (Aissa) standing “like an apparition behind a transparent veil—a veil woven of sunbeams and shadows” (Conrad, AOI 61) before the thoroughly mesmerized Willems. Evidently, the image of the forest is evoked through a female body—a site imbued with unknown secrets of prehistoric Nature, and hence, an ‘other’ to Willems, the colonial man of culture. What is aestheticized here is not just the abundance of the material riches of the scene, but also the “unknowableness” or the “otherness” of woman and Nature that resist, as dissenting “others,” Willems’ piercing imperial “gaze” of culture. Simone de Beauvoir, canvassing this “otherness” of woman, very aptly claims that woman “is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is

incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (16).

This ‘otherization’ is heavily grounded on Val Plumwood’s concept of “hyperseparation” or “radical exclusion” (49) where the ‘other’ is to be treated as “not merely different but inferior” (49). Confirming the ‘otherness’ and the concomitant ‘inferiority’ of Aissa before Willems’ superior “self,” the narrator remarks:

She 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, AOI 97)

The notion that “they have nothing in common—not a thought, not a feeling” (Conrad, AOI 97) ascertains the maximization of the distance between their polarized spheres of existence preventing them from being contagious by common overlapping qualities. Sustainance of this unbridgeable gap, maintains Albert Memmi, is a subtle but efficacious means of colonization as he observes delicately: “. . . this gap must be kept from being filled” (qtd. in Plumwood 51). As a consequence, the “strange, muffled figure” of the “savage woman [Aissa]” (Conrad, AOI 96) representing the dark, mysterious Nature becomes a mythologized embodiment of Nature and woman’s difference and inferiority from the quintessential pre-eminence of Willems’ culture.

This woman-Nature connection leads to further lethal connotations imposing on them a deplorably mercurial and harmful status. According to the narrator, the charm that Aissa carries being the resplendent image of Nature, also contains “a sense of irreparable loss”; it begins with a feminine “caress and ends in a blow” (Conrad, AOI 60); it raises “new hopes” and “new desires” but also “new fears” (Conrad, AOI 61). The ambiguity that is sustained through the similarity between Aissa and Nature indicates that, despite their outward semblance of enthralling aesthetic beauty, they inwardly harbour an underlying threat for man as inimical and perfidious “others.”

The narrator further claims that the land, like the lady [Aissa], poses an external facade of “all brilliance, all smiles”; but within this exterior “promise of joy and beauty,” there is concealed “the blossoming of the dead” and “nothing but poison and decay” (Conrad, AOI 61) veiled beneath the “capricious promise of . . . [its] track” (Conrad, AOI 59). Besides the land, the sea, like a perilously dubious woman, is “beautiful but unscrupulous”; is “glorious in its smiles”, but “irresistible in its anger, capricious, enticing, illogical, irresponsible”; is “a thing to love”, but also “a thing to fear” (Conrad, AOI 24) as it gently but cunningly lulls man into her “boundless faith” (Conrad, AOI 24-25) and then slays him by casting a deadly spell of “quick and causeless anger (Conrad AOI 25) . She allures even the strongest of men through her “inscrutable mystery” and “supreme witchery” to contentedly “live by its grace” and “die by its will” (Conrad, AOI 25). In a similar vein, the river Congo in Heart of Darkness, also plays woman-like unreliable, dubious and enigmatic pranks with the colonial explorers. Its “streams of death in life,” baffles them with a “general sense of vague and oppressive wonder” debarring them to form any “particularized

impression” and giving “hints for nightmares” (Conrad, Heart of Darkness 15).

Marlow believes further that like an adversative woman-presence, “Nature herself . . . [tries] to ward off the intruders [the colonial explorers]” (Conrad, HD 14-15). So, Nature (either the land or the sea or the river or the forest) is comprehended by the narrator to be indeterminably fickle, complex and elusive like a woman.

In another form of “otherisation,” Nature is seen as an insignificant woman vulnerable to rape and molestation. In An Outcast of the Islands for instance, the narrator espouses how once “an incomparably beautiful mistress,” the sea is now defaced, wrinkled, unveiled, stripped and raped by the colonizers encroaching into its realms. The narrator is aware that “countless steam-boats . . . [intrude into] the restless mirror of the Infinite [sea]”; the hands of the engineer tear down “the veil of the terrible beauty [of the sea]”; and finally, “the mystery [of the sea] . . . is destroyed” (Conrad, AOI 25). He further continues that men, the once “loving and devoted servants” in the end become her “cold and exacting masters” robbing her of the “enslaving charm of . . . vastness” she possessed, stripping her of her “beauty, . . . mystery and . . . promise” (Conrad, AOI 25). Such gendered images and epithets exemplify how modern science employs womanly fantasies to devise a methodology for devaluing and manipulating Nature through its feminine sexualization. Caroline Merchant’s stern criticism of such a mechanistic worldview of Nature hints at the latent risks of conceiving it through female sexual metaphors with the progress of modern science that, being propped by the peremptory male hubris, becomes the active agent in inciting this maneuvered denigration of Nature. Further, the narrator’s opinion that the white rulers, being “armed with fire and iron” (Conrad, AOI 25) hold

the “land and the sea under the edge of sharp swords” (Conrad, AOI 85), envisages the masculine aggression of the colonial man’s military fantasies against the feminine Nature where weapons like fire, iron and sharp swords are emblematic of what Carol Cohn calls “the phallic imagery and promise of sexual domination” (qtd. in Birkeland 35).

This penchant of this male domination is further intensified by the sexual image of “penetration.” The confrontation of the colonial man with Nature is mostly gestated in terms of the encounter between coercive male and assailable female sexualities. Annette Kolodny, on such a gendered perception of the whole world of Nature, very aptly says: “Perhaps, after all, the world is really gendered, in some subtle way we have not yet quite understood” (9). Clearly, Marlow’s march into African Nature in Heart of Darkness is conceptualized as a “penetration” into the “virgin forest” (34) forcing her to yield up her secrets. Marlow recounts: “We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness” (Conrad, HD 41) and delineates the journey as an unraveling venture towards Nature’ abounding mystery that “lay deep under the surface” (Conrad, HD 45). To unmask it, Nature has to be raided with the spirit of sexual invasion and conquest as Marlow continues: “the tenebrous land [is] invaded by these mean and greedy phantoms [the colonisers]” (Conrad 83). Penetration, infiltration, intrusion and unraveling, in the end, epitomize the essence of the mission as 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). A similar image is also evoked in Almayer’s Folly when the narrator expresses the

difficulty in “penetrating far inland” into the Malayan island of Boreno full of “gold mines of enormous richness in the interior” (Almayer’s Folly 272).

Endowed with different feminine connotations, Nature is seen as a womb full of treasure that has to be brutally infiltrated and looted, or a virgin who must be cajoled or forced to surrender to patriarchy (the colonizer-rapist) or a mother for the son to direct his sexual drive towards the mother (in Freudian psychoanalytic terms). Marlow readily recognizes that the only desire of the colonizers is to “tear treasure out of the bowels of the land” (Conrad, HD 35) where the very expression “tear” is loaded with characteristic masculine force and vigour.

Woman, conversely, becomes a “metaphoric vehicle” (Kittay 63) (for the land, the sea or the river, etc., or Nature in general) that equips man with a rich domain of feminine images through which he can conceptualize his mediations between himself and Nature and authenticate his domination. Nonetheless, along with his desire to master Nature, he also fears its irrational and inscrutable powers that continually keep on eluding his self-styled rationality. In Heart of Darkness for instance, the colonizers intend to conquer the feminine dark Nature of Africa, but at the same time fear, the “lurking death,” and “hidden evil” brimming through the everlastingly hostile posture of the forest towards them. Eva Feder Kittay very fittingly comments: “Man identifies that which he wants and desires, or has acquired or fears acquiring, as Woman, as is Death itself. These examples direct us to consider the importance of woman’s metaphorization in the conceptual organisation of man’s experience” (64).

Moreover, woman, like Nature is viewed as a useless and disposable “other.” Towards the concluding part of An Outcast of the Islands, Aissa, decorating herself

with “crimson blossoms and white star-shaped flowers” (Conrad 235) and a “mass of pure white champakas and jasmine pressed to her breast” (Conrad 235-236) comes to “charm his [Willems’] eyes” (Conrad 235). Presenting herself as a dazzling image of Nature, she submits herself as a mere instrument of the sensual gratification of her masculine master. In Catherine Roach’s words, woman like Nature functions, for man, as a “well-trained and well-groomed gratifier of her master” (51). Ironically, Willems wants to give a “stunning blow” to “that flower bedecked woman” for the sake of saving “his prestige, his superiority—something of immense importance” (Conrad, AOI 236). Manifestly, man wants to disassociate himself from both woman and Nature for the preservation of his self-acclaimed superiority from these “others” as association with them, for him, is tantamount to a fall from grace.

The male-dominated monotheist worldview pioneered by the Judeo-Christian tradition greatly helped the institutionalized exclusion of women from the creation of symbolic systems through “naming.” In this symbolic paradigm, man unquestionably enjoys a “monopoly of naming” (Li 282) whereas woman is deprived of an effective participation. Adam’s “naming” of the animals and the woman, as Mary Daly elucidates in her famous book Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation, is prototypical of this discrimination. “Naming” therefore, happens to be an immensely powerful patriarchal tool for structuring, ordering and moulding the perception of the world in a typical “male” way through the prefigured “male” language and thought. Through this “naming,” man associates images of bestiality of Nature with woman and reversely, womanly witchery images with Nature. Consequently, Nature is very often called a witch and woman a beast. In

Heart of Darkness, noticeably, the experience of the wilderness of African Nature is variously expressed through an entire range of witchery images including eroticism, embrace, cannibalism and devilishness. Nature's wilderness, says the narrator, has "patted him [Kurtz] on the head," and "caressed him," "loved him, embraced him" and finally, "got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (Conrad, HD 57) just like that of a vampire or a witch. Ernest Schachtel explicates it as: "Nature is to man whatever name he wants to give her. He will perceive nature according to the names he gives her, according to the relations and perspective he chooses" (qtd. in Li 282). Likewise in Almayer's Folly, Almayer's wife is often called a "savage tigress" (Conrad 264) whereas, in An Outcast of the Islands, Aissa is called a "wild creature" (Conrad 68). This constructed interchangeability between the image of woman and that of Nature becomes a patriarchal artifact through which he achieves the collective segregation of both.

An analogically common ground of savagery further intensifies patriarchy's rationale for the symbolic alignment between woman and Nature and their concomitant otherization. In Almayer's Folly, Almayer's daughter Nina lives in the "private sphere" of her "savage mother" (Conrad 274) what the narrator projects as the "hopeless quagmire of barbarism full of strong and uncontrolled feminine passions [of Malayan Nature]" (274) contrary to the "public sphere" of Almayer's civilized and cultural values imbued with masculine reason. 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, AF 264) from Almayer’s culture. In Heart of Darkness, correspondingly, Kurtz’s native African mistress is introduced as a blunt manifestation of the wild and savage barbarism of Nature. The forest (or Nature) finds its own reflection in Kurtz’s black mistress as Marlow feels that “the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life” of the forest looks at the “savage and superb” woman as if looking at “the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul” (Conrad, HD 74). Furthermore, the woman is presented as being inscrutably ominous, mysterious, tenebrous and passionate like Nature as she gazes at the colonizers “without a stir, and like the wilderness itself” and approaches them with “an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose” (Conrad, HD 74).

The patriarchal construct of the woman-Nature connection is further accentuated in Conrad’s Almayer’s Folly. The narrator believes that Almayer’s daughter Nina is not worthy of “Christian teaching, social education, and a good glimpse of civilized life” in Singapore because of “her nature” (Conrad, AF 274)—an expression that demands deep speculation. In fact, her teachers comprehend that “her nature” (Conrad, AF 274) has an innate affinity with Malayan Nature and hence, makes herself inadaptable to the cultural and civilized city-life of Singapore. Her education, as a result, terminates in “a sense of humiliation” (Conrad, AF 274) and she is sent back to Malaya. She belongs, construes the narrator, to the “circumstances of a half-savage and miserable life” (Conrad, AF 267) in the Malayan forest and her mother Mrs. Almayer to the womanly fascinations of the “domestic drudgery” of “half-savage womankind” and “the great but occult influence” (Conrad, AF 261) of Nature. What becomes explicit here is that the narrator seemingly fabricates a bond

between woman and Nature endorsing the marginalization of both, which in fact originates from what Janis Birkeland would call an “androcentric premise” (24) of thinking.

The culture (male)/nature (female) dichotomy pervading these novels is reinforced by the multiple jeopardy of race and class and gender. In An Outcast of the Islands, Aissa is otherized not just because she is “a complete savage” and a “wild creature” of Malayan Nature, but also because she is the progeny of a different, inferior and impure Malayan “race” contrasted to “the unstained purity of his [Willems’] life, of his race, of his civilization” (Conrad 68). In Almayer’s Folly, similarly, Mrs. Almayer’s inferiorization is actualized not just through her proximity to Nature and estrangement from Culture, but also through the exposition of her substandard, non-European racial origin. In addition, Nina is despised for her mixed blood as Ford, Almayer’s friend, laments before him: “You can’t make her white” (Conrad, AF 267) and therefore, in Singapore, she is treated with “an outburst of contempt from white people for her mixed blood” (Conrad, AF 274). The discrimination, visibly, does not confine itself to the level of male/female or culture/nature binaries; rather, extends to the broader spectrum encompassing racial, ethnic and spatial differences that lethally augment the already existing disparity. Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood’s non-reductionist ecofeminism would lash out not only at woman’s unjust association with Nature, but also the multiple oppressions colligating race, class and gender underpinning the former. Ecofeminists like Plumwood believe that all racist, sexist, classist and anthropocentric assumptions of

the superiority of whites over non-whites, males over females, masters over servants, humans over animals and plants must be culturally discarded.

So, as a potential site for awe, wonder and fear, Nature becomes a complex, composite female or a “metaphoric register” (Soper 105) of the general male revulsion towards female. It is both divinely marveled as a feminine sublime as well as violently penetrated as a virgin. However, it can also bewitch her seducer (man) with all the capriciousness and unpredictability of a woman and become dangerously unruly unleashing her wrath with a rancorous fury against all those who afford to mess with her. On the other hand, woman is associated with all the bestiality of Nature and can behave in a similarly impulsive and furious manner to man as does Nature. Hence, according to the encoded norms of thoroughly masculine thinking, both must be excluded from man’s cultural sphere on the common ground of their feminine, passionate, uncivilized and bestial gesticulations.

Thus, an ecofeminist analysis of the patriarchal texts of Joseph Conrad not only probes the colonizer’s attempts for the simultaneous feminization of Nature and the naturalization of woman, but also unearths the opprobrious undertone of such a practice. The study poses itself as a sharp-edged critique of this flawed patriarchal thinking of supremacy over Nature and woman which stands as a positive hindrance to the realization of an unbiased harmony between man, woman and Nature where everybody is treated equally without any predisposed bias or discrimination.

### A Note on the Abbreviations Used

The abbreviations mentioned below are used for avoiding repetition and tediousness.

1 HD: Heart of Darkness

2 AF: Almayer's Folly

3 AOI: An Outcast of the Islands

4 Documentation is done according to MLA style sheet

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