

By the Name of Nature but against Nature: An Ecological Study of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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Abstract

The relationship of people with nature is usually expressed in different ways, and certainly literature is one of them. Nature as one of the indispensable elements of writing has drawn the attention of many writers specifically the novelists. In this study, the researchers attempt to apply ecocritical analysis of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. The researchers also show how the relationship between man and nature which had been sympathetic and harmonized in Romantic period changed to cruel and heartless one in industrial and capitalistic Modern time; and how Conrad's Heart of Darkness meticulously shows this alternation.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Joseph Conrad, ecology; postcolonialism, ecofeminism

Introduction

'Ecocriticism' as a term emerged in the world of critical study in the late 1970s by combining 'criticism' and 'ecology'. Before that, it was the word 'urbanature' which described nature and life of mankind. Urbanature implies that all human and nonhuman life, as well as all animate and inanimate objects around us, are connected to each other. The ideas of nature, like a number of other concepts, have been invoked in so many differing ways over the centuries and critical study of that has appropriated different divisions over the centuries. M. H. Abrams believes that:

Ecocriticism or Environmental criticism designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and biological and physical environment, conducted with as an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities. Ecocritics do not share a single theoretical perspective or procedure; instead, their engagements with environmental literature manifest a wide range of traditional, poststructural, and postcolonial points of view and modes of analysis. (71)

Although in this research we approach ecocriticism through studying a novel, we can apply it to various literary texts.

Our text here is *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's everlasting masterpiece.

This work seems to elicit an unusual degree of criticism, especially from highly influential voices of the African continent. The publication of *Heart of Darkness* can be seen as an essential part of the literature development that Europeans expanded over into the other parts of the world. This work has been studied from different perspectives of literary criticism especially postcolonial ones.

Ecocriticism

The study of ecocriticism is relatively recent, especially when compared with the other types of approaches in criticism. As Cheryl Glotfelty mentions in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, “even in the field of literature, ecocriticism took longer to become established than most recent movement in literary theory” (xvi-xvii). It was William Rueckert (1978) who became the first to use the term ecocriticism. Then in the 1980s some scholars began organizing, collecting and publishing on ecocriticism in collaboration with others, and helped to publicize it.

Horald Fromm used the term ‘Ecocriticism’ to “rally scholars to the environmental banner at his 1991 special session of the MLA, *Ecocriticism: The Greeting of Literary Studies*” (Glotfelty xvii). Then at the 1992 ASLE, “the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, was formed” (ibid. xx). Glotfelty renewed the concept of ecocriticism by shifting the research focus, inspiring the recognition of the value of nature. Humans and nature are inseparable and have steady influence on each other. Relatively, the Ecocriticism focuses on literary and artistic expression of human experience primarily in a natural, and consequently in a cultural world.

The ecocriticism signifies that literature cannot be approached in a way that in which *man* and its environment stand against each other. In contrast, it must be approached in a way that includes man as an ecosystem. As Klue writes *Man* “is neither master nor slave to it, but simply one part of an intricate system” (Klue 1).

Ecocentrism and Technocentrism

Ecocentrism views humankind as a part of the global ecosystem and a subject to the ecological laws. According to Dobson “ecocentrics lack faith in modern large-scale technology and the technical and bureaucratic elites, and they abhor centralization and materialism” (33). However, ecocriticism is not against technology. It advocates “soft, intermediate, and appropriate alternative technologies partly because they are considered more environmentally benign, but also because they are potentially democratic” (Ibid). Technocentrism considers natural problems and says that our society will encounter them and tries to achieve great progress.

Ecocentrism encircles great differences in emphasis within “a paradigm of nurturing nature rather than intervening destructively in it” (Ibid). It is what O’Riodan calls “communalism” in which “economic relationships are intimately connected with social relationships and feelings of belonging, sharing, caring and surviving” (89). In the world of technology, the aim of nature and the natural world is increasingly the subject to human technical reordering, and we rarely experience nature in “its unhominised state as a prior order of reality to human claims and interests” (ibid. 258).

Kate Pigby in *Introducing Criticism in the 21st Century* (2002) refers to Rousseau concerning the progress of civilization in the domination of nature that had been achieved at “the price of increased social inequality, alienation and military conflict” (163). This analysis is akin to what the German social theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer would later term as the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’. They believed “a whole new order of barbarism right in the midst of the technologically most advanced civilization in the world history” (Ibid).

Romantic Ecology

Ecocritical awareness of the non-human world begins not with the environmental revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, but with a new definition of nature first offered by Romantic writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This shift eventually brought a new emphasis on connections between nature and society. The Romantic movement was an artistic and intellectual one, commonly expressed in literature. But it was not just a set of ideas, unrelated to what was happening in the world. It was clearly a reaction against material changes in society, which accompanied emerging and expanding industrial capitalism in the 18th century. As Russell puts it in:

“the Romantic movement is characterized, as a whole, by the substitution of aesthetic for utilitarian standards. Romantic hated how industrialization made previously beautiful places ugly, and they rejected the vulgarity of those who made money in trade” (Russell 653).

Romantic artistic and philosophical practices and theories are preserved within contemporary ecological languages and beliefs. Romantic nourishes modern ecocentrism in two senses; “First, it is a particular mental disposition, which today implies a liberated imagination, emotion, passion, irrationalism and subjectivism. Second, the late eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantic movement, which championed and developed Romantic attitudes, has strong and direct historical links into modern ecocentrism” (William 189). Ecological Romanticism mentions that globalization has undermined any coherent sense of place. At least, that is an argument within Romantic and Ecocritical thinking.

As Morton believes, “such thinking aims to conserve a piece of the world or subjectivity from the ravages of industrial capitalism and its ideologies” (85). Jonathan Bate’s *Romantic ecology* of 1991 forms a leading example of a significant early step in the evolution of ecocriticism, especially in Britain. Bate revived the dominant nineteenth century perception of the crucial Romantic poet William Wordsworth as a “poet of nature whose work forms a coherent protest against the dominant ideologies of political economy and industrialism” (qtd. in Kroeber 35). Bate takes up and reaffirms Wordsworth’s proto-ecological anti-industrial arguments, defending the naturalness of the life of local statesmen.

Modern environmental criticism often continues anti-industrial argument, “deploying concepts of nature as a moral and psychic norm” (Clark 18). In contrast to Marxist critics who have claimed that the Romantic ecology involves a retreat from society into spiritual transcendence, Bate can argue that “the Romantic ecology has nothing to do with flight from the material world, from history and society” (Bate 40). It is in fact an attempt to enable mankind to live better in the material world by entering into harmony with the environment.

Ecocriticism in the Heart of Darkness

From Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's folly*, to *the rescue* near the end of his career, African and Asian mysterious areas had an important place in his writings. Indeed, Conrad's writing career sprang directly from his experiences of the region as a sailor and the stories he had there. Marlow as Conrad's alter ego refers to this point in the *Heart of Darkness*, too: in the story he states that "I had then, as you remember, just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas- a regular dose of the East- six years or so, and I was loafing about" (7).

Conrad's view was commanded by the characteristic despair of the late Victorian worldview, which originated in all these developments in the nineteenth century, which combined with industrialism to suggest that "so far from being the eternal setting created by God for his favor, man, the natural world was merely the temporary and accidental result of purposeless physical processes" (Aubry 215). Conrad was influenced by the general attitudes to Africa in the late nineteenth-century Europe, an attitude which "had replaced the enlightenment sympathy for 'noble savages' brought down into slavery with a post-Darwinian view that the Africans indigenous were primitive savages but not noble" (Brantlinger 168).

When in the novella he talks about Congolese he says: "They shouted, sang: their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks-these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast" (Conrad 15). Or somewhere else we see: "they passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages" (Ibid 17). As Doyle mentions, in the earlier years of his reign, the King Leopold of Belgium began to display that interest in central Africa which for a long time was ascribed to nobility and philanthropy until the contrast between such motives, and the actual unscrupulous commercialism, became too glaring to be sustained.

As far back as the year 1876 he called a conference of humanitarians and travelers for the purpose of debating various plans by which the Dark continent might be opened up. Stanley was the missionary. As the conference claimed the exploration of the country and the founding of stations which should be rest-houses for travelers and centers of civilization were the aims of the conference. On the return of Stanley from his great journey in 1878, he said: "Bolobo is a great center for ivory and camwood powder trade" (Doyle 90). So this is the whole point of what Kurtz and Marlow talk about.

When Marlow talks about the river on the map he mentions: "I remembered there was a big concern, a company for the trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself, they can't trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water-steamboats. The snake had charmed me" (Conrad 8). Domination and unfairness of wealth and power were perpetual facts of human society at that time and even today. As Said says:

"in today's global setting they are also interpretable as having something to do with imperialism. The imperial attitude is beautifully captured in the complicated and rich narrative form of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (5). This novella has been considered a major attack on the horrors perpetrated in the Belgian Congo by King Leopold and his agents. Imperialists want to overwhelm the poor countries especially the third world and African countries. So they try to deceive them as Marlow tries to cheat the black man by one biscuit:

“I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede’s ship’s biscuit I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held- there was no other movement and no other glance” (Conrad 19). Conrad creates a brilliantly ironic structure in which the diabolic Kurtz demonstrates “how the Dark continent grew dark” (Moore 75). As they are approaching the inner station where Kurtz was, they find more dark places and people: “Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance, flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest” (Conrad 71). Kurtz showed this meaning of darkness at the end of his life: “he cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision he cried out twice. A cry that was no more than a breath: “The horror! The horror” (Ibid 82).

In most of Conrad’s novella the characters attempt to see the land, the environment, the river and the animals either as a treatment or as an object to misuse:

We call..... all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. (Conrad 15)

And then “the forest, the creek, the mud, the river-seemed to beckon us with a dishonoring flourish before the sunlit face of the land, a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart” (Ibid 38).

In 1975 the well-known Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe made a vigorous attack on Conrad. His subject was *An Image of Africa* and his general theme was that Conrad used Africa as a history less and barbaric opposite to European civilization, and that his treatment of the Congolese people was offensively stereotyped and unsympathetic. His general approach was political but he also claimed that *Heart of Darkness* should no longer be regarded as a masterpiece, and even that Conrad was a ‘bloody racist’ (qtd. in Watts 85). Achebe argued that *Heart of Darkness* should be dropped from the canon as an “offensive and totally deplorable book, a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question” (125).

William Lyon Phelps in the *Advance of the English Novel* (1916) observes that whereas “Dickens is a refracting telescope, Conrad is a reflector,” and goes on to identify a mirror of Conrad’s fiction: “his face to some extent is a map of his soul. He looks like a competent, fearless, and highly intelligent clipper captain. His eyes have looked on the brutality of nature and the brutality of men are unafraid” (qtd. In Mallios 42). When Marlow talks about his purpose in the Congo he says:

My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound- as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible. (Conrad 18)

More recently, ecocriticism has begun to interest postcolonial scholars, who see productive tension between the two schools:

Respective ethical concerns and critical methods, and who foresee the possibilities of a postcolonial Ecocriticism that combines the anti-authoritarian sympathies of each, not just as a collective means of addressing the social and environmental problem of the present, but also of imaging alternative futures in which our current ways of looking at ourselves and our relation to the world might be creatively transformed. (Huggan and Tiffin 721)

This view of transformation is remarkable in Marlow's words:

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago- the other day..... light came out of this river since- you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker- may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. (Conrad 5)

Postcolonial ecocriticism preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text "while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world" (Huggan and Tiffin 14). Postcolonialists want to know environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as "inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically and persistently depend" (ibid. 6).

The narrator talks about the aim of the stations that was superficially humanizing but intellectually trading: "each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (Conrad 38). In his excellent 2008 article "Toward An African Ecocriticism," Anthony Vital suggests that the best way to reconcile postcolonial criticism and environmental criticism might be to take into account "the complex interplay of social history with the natural world, and how language both shapes and reveals such interactions" (90). In the novella going to Kurtz's station shows this:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of over-shadowed distances. (Conrad 39)

Postcolonial geography is well placed to offer the corrective reminder that there is no environmental justice without social justice, and that the spaces in which we and others live are actively produced and can be just as actively transformed. The *Heart of Darkness* is a text that most obviously sets out to criticize the economic exploitation inherent in the colonial idea. As Marlow in a quoted passage indicates: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" (Conrad 6).

When we come to Marlow's experience and his expressed views, we can find some traces of racism. For example when they are coming out by the boats he says:

We were paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs, glistening. They shouted, sang: their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque mask-these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. (Ibid 15)

Economists and political motives are easy to detect in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This shows that European real purpose in such countries was nothing more than a mere exploitation. One of the crucial tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism as a rising field has been to challenge western ideologies of development or progression. These contests have mostly been in alignment with "radical third-worldist critiques that tend to see development as little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interests of the West" (Huggan and Tiffin 27).

According to the noble prize winning economist, Amartya Sen development is first and foremost human development, and can thus be measured in terms of an enlargement of human choices that actively requires "the removal of major sources of unfreedom, poverty, social unrest, political repression that by definition limit the scope and quality of people's everyday lives" (qtd. in Huggan 29). So Kurtz as the symbol of European people knows the development just as getting more and more ivory: "to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" (Conrad 35). Definitions of development are in part arguments about the social, as well as economic benefits. In Gustavo Esteva's view:

Development and the progression it implies is better understood as a form of 'colonizing anti-colonialism' in which poor countries of the world are simultaneously seen as socially and politically backward, and in which the positive meaning of the word 'development'- profoundly rooted after two centuries of its social construction- is a reminder of what these countries are not. (23)

In his writing, Conrad repeatedly encounters with the issue that was to become so important in the 20th century, that is, how to describe another culture. The ecocriticism pays attention to literary and artistic expression of human knowledge mainly in a natural and inevitably in a culturally formed world. Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) maps the methods of ecocriticism. She notes that ecocriticism asks a wide-ranging set of questions, and insists:

All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnectedness between nature and culture, specifically the artifacts of language and literature. (xix)

Alongside explicit references to and representation of the natural world, "human responses to nonhuman nature are often negatively inscribed inversely articulated in culture" (Feder 57). So the Kurtz's story is partly the story of a man working through his culture's understandings of humanity in nature and "finally pushing beyond the boundaries his anthropocentric community has established to define itself in opposition to nature" (McCarthy 643).

By having a cultural view of nature, capitalism and imperialism can be meaningful in this novella. Capitalism is destroying humanity through its invasion and destabilization of the natural ground of civilization. Ecosocialism is based on the premise that:

The suppression of capitalism not only as a mode of production and consumption, but as a whole paradigm of class and gender domination, and of the present capitalist / industrial technology, will make it possible to move to democratic and egalitarian social forms of organization with a radically different relation to the environment. (Johns and Kovel 128)

Conrad's novella proposes a similar vision of imperialism, and his characters describe a nature where "beings struggle to survive in a Godless mechanism and where the forces unfold in competition with men" (Ibid). Throughout the *Heart of Darkness* it is as white as the imperialists have declared war on the African land itself:

In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech and nothing happened. (Conrad 15)

This haunting image of "incomprehensible bombing of the land sets the pattern of European enmity toward the environment" (McCarthy 628). Conrad was writing at a time when most British people, including many socialists, would have regarded imperialism as an admirable enterprise. "He was also helping the cause of African in the Congo by drawing attention to their ill-treatment" (Watts 56). In his well-known apprehension of the Congo's man, Marlow pierces the border between European and African humanity, and suggests that border was the result of looking-down eyes on the Congolese:

We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the right of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign and no memories. 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- the suspicion of their not being inhuman. (Conrad 42)

In the view of gender domination, women mediate between men and nature. In this scheme of things, the true human being became considered male; meanwhile women, though formally recognized as human beings, experience their status as a tenuous and constantly undermined right. As Kovel writes, "in capitalistic society, women are sunk into nature, and nature and women are alike devalued while men soar freely. Nature is devalued part of the female principle, variously considered wild and threatening or passive, inert and exploitable" (4). When Marlow encounters the woman in Kurtz's station he says:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed, she must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress.

And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (Conrad 71)

About the exploitation of animal in this novella we mention to a fruitful trade with ivory. Ivory trade now is forbidden in Africa but illegal hunting is constantly a threat. With different markets, allied to a more developed military and transportation technologies, ensuring that the demand for ivory and other elephant products can produce sometimes impressive economic success.

As Graham Huggan in *Interdisciplinary Measures* writes: “elephant becomes a noble victim in a traditional society thrown disastrously off kilter and the continuing assault on African wildlife contains within it a history of European imperialist greed” (76). In the *Heart of Darkness* gaining Congolese elephant ivories was the aim of Kurtz and other agents: “the only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had” (Conrad 27). And even they were ready to kill the others to achieve their aims. Though the man who was explaining the situation to Marlow when he met Kurtz said:

I don't mind telling you, he wanted to shoot me, too, one day-but I don't judge him. “shoot you!” I cried what for? Well, I had a small lot of ivory the chief of that village near my house gave me. You see I used to shoot game for them. Well, he wanted it, and wouldn't hear reason. He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory. (Ibid 66)

And in the end Kurtz transformation into ivory can be read as an image of the human being becoming part of the natural world.

Conclusion

Heart of Darkness is an example of a kind of fiction that became so popular throughout the twentieth century, as the modernist movement recognizes it as a light both penetrating and domineering profitable and threatening at once in the traditional aesthetic and political conventions that it challenges. This type of literature shows that light is used to depict civilization has its own contradictions. On the one hand, the light of civilization pledges to construct a utopia of eternal feasting in the cities of unending abundance and on the other hand the methods used to manifest this vision destroy the conditions necessary for its realization.

From its first appearance in 1899, *Heart of Darkness* has been considered a major attack on the horrors perpetrated in the Belgian Congo by Leopold, king of the Belgians, and his agents. It is an environmental novella because it is set in a place and time of ecological disaster. And the text is sensitive to connect the imperialism with ecological exploitation. It engages competing definitions of humanity in nature. In his novella Conrad wants to tell us the clear cultivation of the native Congolese was hypocritically concerning the dark intention to achieve the natural resources, wealth and every useful thing from the black.

Another feature of this novella is that the human and nature conflict has happened by human destruction. Therefore, it seems that human gain much more profit than the loss. But the subsequent loss of the humankind is considerable and disastrous as well. The extermination and slaughtering of the natives almost brought an end to an alternative culture, and the conscience of people has been lost in the pursuit of ivory and fame as it occurred to Kurtz. Ivory is the text's most important symbol in this novella.

It is the novel's objective of a western logic that shapes all relations of profit. Ivory shows the philosophy of disconnection that considers human beings as separate from the world around them. Ivory demonstrated as the image of Kurtz's recognition with the nature. When nature is not threatening in *Heart of Darkness*, it is being devastated. *Heart of Darkness* can be read as a criticism of hypocrisy in general and imperial ethics in particular. *Heart of Darkness* wants to show us the surprising speed of industrialization elevated the development of imperialism, which causes the vulnerable effect on nature. So it is necessary for human to rethink about their lifestyle and shift from the manipulative system to a harmoniously co-existing system with nature.

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