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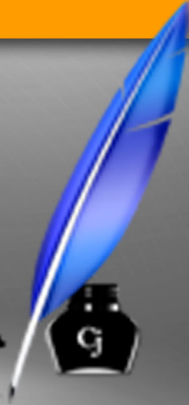
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Conrad's Treatment of Women in *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract:

The objective of the present paper is to inquire whether Conrad's attitude to women is typically Victorian or rather a different one. When a writer is writing at the end of a period (here the Victorian Period) or at the beginning of another one (the Modern Age), he becomes an interesting case of study. Here, my focus is particularly on *Heart of Darkness*. But instead of making only study of characters, the article critically analyses Conrad's attitude reflected through those characters.

Keywords: Society, women, truth, darkness

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a landmark in the history of English literature since it is one of those novels where Modernism declares its arrival. *Heart of Darkness* is more special in that it has become a subject to the study of different branches of literary theory such as feminism, colonialism and post-colonialism, reader-response criticism, archetypal criticism, deconstruction, new historicism and what not. As feminism has become one of the commonest issues of our present day, it will not be irrelevant to make an inquiry as to how Conrad treats women in the novel.

Needless to say, the male characters in the novel are much more powerful than the female ones. That's why Conrad is accused of portraying his female figures. Moreover the description of female characters in *Heart of Darkness* is limited. However, the issue becomes more complex when we inquire as to whether Conrad has presented them as, to borrow Patmore's phrase, 'Angel(s) in the House' or, he brings them out of the house.

Let us take it for granted that Marlow's attitude to women is Conrad's attitude to women in the novel. The woman who is first to appear in the novel is Marlow's aunt. She appears at a moment of crisis: Marlow had cherished the idea of going to Congo for a job, but he fails to get it on his own accord; when all his attempts fail, his aunt's influence solves the problem. In Marlow's words:

I tried the women. I Charlie Marlow set the women to work – to get a job. (Conrad 29)

But the portrait of her character smacks of irony : she is 'a dear enthusiastic soul' (Conrad 29) living in her own world. She is 'ready to do anything' (Conrad 29) for Marlow in the name of a 'noble cause' (Conrad 33) that is enlightening the natives of the Belgian Congo. According to her, a worker in a colonial enterprise is something 'like an emissary of light, something like a

lower sort of apostle, (Conrad 33). Here the reader passes a verdict on her : she is totally ignorant of reality. Marlow observes :

It is queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own . . . (Conrad 33)

But does Marlow ever try to bring them in touch with reality? Does he want it at all?

Here Conrad's attitude to women is certainly typically Victorian : women must be beautiful, sophisticated, chaste, tender, dignified 'angel in the house'; but must be confined to illusion never trying to grasp the reality and self realization (Ray 144)

In contrast to Marlow's aunt, there are two women whom Marlow meets in the office of the Company and who, unlike the aunt, is quite in touch with reality. When Marlow meets them, they are busy 'knitting black wool' (Conrad 33). The colour in the context and their act of knitting have symbolic connotations; black is reminder of death whereas knitting is associated with fate:

The women, like the Greek Fate Sisters, were knitting the dark destiny of Marlow and others, as it were. (Ray 145)

However, a perceptive reader can feel that they, at least, are quite acquainted with the colonial enterprise though they have no role to play in it. Conrad reduces them to mere symbols.

The next woman whom the reader as well as Marlow encounters is the black native girl, Kurtz's consort. In Marlow's words :

She was savage and superb wild-eyed and magnificent [. . .] She stood

looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of

brooding over an inscrutable purpose. (Conrad 87)

The juxtaposition of the contrasting words 'savage and superb', 'wild-eyed and magnificent' create in us a mixed response of attraction and repulsion, a response that one feels towards wilderness :

It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling. (Conrad 87)

This observation comes out from Marlow when he makes his journey through wilderness to Congo. Thus, once again Marlow uses the dark woman as a symbol – to symbolize the forces of darkness which are simultaneously savage and superb.

The image of the black woman becomes bright when compared to the white woman i.e. the Intended. The very image of the Intended is reminder of death and disappointment:

She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning. (Conrad 101)

In contrast to her, the native woman is filled with life and vitality. There seems to be a silent battle between the two : on one side there is the Intended and on other side is the native woman and in between the two stands Kurtz. And the result is obvious : the black woman wins over Kurtz. The uncivilized defeats the civilized. Europe succumbs to Africa! In this context the observation of C.B.Cox needs passing mention:

If we compare this splendid savage with Kurtz's fiancée, his Intended, it may seem that we are setting side by side dynamic energy with sterile hypocrisy, life with death . . . She (the Intended) has chosen for herself a graveyard, where she can exist in comfort . . . ; her condition symbolizes that of western Europe. In contrast, the savage lives out her sexual urges as naturally as if she were a wild beast. (Cox 56)

But similarity exists between them: both are tragic; both have been fascinated by Kurtz; both have been betrayed by him.

But Marlow cannot escape without facing a question : is Marlow justified in telling the lie to the Intended? Marlow has his logic to justify himself : "I want . . . something to live with" (Conrad 104). That is to say, Marlow's lie that Kurtz died with her name in his lips would supply sustenance to the Intended for the rest of her life, as it were. That's why Thomas Moser opines, ". . . she does not deserve to hear the truth." (Moser 81)

The feminists would, however, not leave Marlow (or Conrad) scot-free so easily. As Marlow himself says, "He (a man) must meet the truth with his own true stuff – with his inborn strength" (Conrad 60). Yet he does not bring the lady in touch with truth. Or, does he mean 'a male' by the word 'man'? Or, does he suggest that a man must meet the truth, not a woman? Again, the Intended was living a sort of life which was almost equivalent to death. In fact, the time Marlow meets her, her life was a sort of living death. So to bring her world in contact with truth would not have done her any greater harm. Thus, Marlow, in telling the lie, has not performed any brave deed. The Intended is kept in the darkness of lie.

There are more charges that are leveled against Conrad for the way he treats women in *Heart of Darkness*. One would not fail to notice that Conrad never gave the women names. The Intended has also no name. Is she called Intended because she is intended for someone else, not for herself? Again the women are also reduced to mere possessive cases. Their identity depends on males : Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's Intended, the Company's two women, etc. In our modern world, both the men and the women have equal responsibility to and equal dignity in the society. The term 'Angel in the House' has lost its relevance. So the way Conrad presents the women appears shocking to us.

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