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Critiquing Anthropocentrism: The Anti-Anthropocentric Discourses in Joseph Conrad's Novels

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Abstract

Despite being subject to manifold critical interventions in the past, Joseph Conrad's novels still invite further critical analysis by the recently developed theoretical paradigm of Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, for its thoroughgoing exploration of the causative history of the 'otherization,' 'domination,' and 'exploitation' of Nature, finds The Enlightenment majorly responsible for such anthropocentric devaluation of Nature. Conrad's delineation of the man-Nature dialectic, however, seems to present a sustained critique of the Nature-derogating principles of The Enlightenment through its initial exposition and subsequent demolition of anthropocentrism. Such a reversal method takes us to a conclusion that Conrad does not promote the idea of man being the master of Nature, rather, establishes, in concurrence with what ecocritics would intend to ascertain in the end that man is nothing but an infinitesimally small element in the vast biotic life of Nature.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, The Enlightenment, Dualism

Joseph Conrad's literary oeuvre has been read, re-read, examined and re-examined from almost all the critical and theoretical frameworks available at hand, such as: postcolonial studies, feminist studies, gender studies, psychoanalytic studies, narratological studies and many more. Despite the incredibly humongous outpouring of critical interventions on his writing over the years, the relatively lately flourished theory of ecocriticism readily demands for a re-reading of his works to yield a composite understanding of the intricate man-Nature dialectics complexly interwoven in his oeuvre. Revealingly, this reading promises to unveil Conrad's precocious and futuristic engagement with a systematic ecocritical discourse that evolved many years after his death—a discourse that runs as the foundational core of his overall narrative structure. Needless to

say, Ecocriticism poses a staunch and defiant critique to anthropocentrism—an exclusively human-centered worldview which, though discursively embedded in the bedrocks of classical Western philosophy and religion, has its culmination point in the self-aggrandizing, scientific and progressive principles of *The Enlightenment*.

The fundamental premise of ecocriticism, while aiming at the exploration of the causative history of Nature's stark and enforced passivity in the modern man's anthropocentric cultural terrain, holds that Nature has become conspicuously silent in the human-centered Western discursive formations decreed by Enlightenment pioneers, especially Bacon and Descartes. "For half a millennium," says Christopher Manes, "Man has been the centre of conversation in the West. This fictional character has occluded the natural world, leaving it voiceless and subjectless" (26). It hardly needs mentioning that Bacon, an illustrious Enlightenment-pioneer and the celebrated and ideological father of Science, evaluates Nature purely in terms of its instrumental value while disregarding its ontological facticity and conceptualizing it purely in terms of utilitarian values and in terms of its exclusive usability for mankind. Descartes, on the other hand, looks condescendingly at Nature defining it as a mere drab and insensate body devoid of the qualities of mind or spirit; it is a philosophical ramification of his infamous mind/body dualism or its corresponding man/Nature dualism[1] that declares man as the lone possessor of mind or spirit and discredits Nature as dead matter bereft of the formers. On the whole, these two major pioneers of Enlightenment anthropocentrism contribute, in their own significant but notorious ways, towards the utter derogation of Nature, either as a mere instrument of human telos, or as mere mindless matter or body meant for exclusive human possession and use.

In this scenario, a close look at Conrad's Nature-narrative would reveal its deep and sustaining engagement with these typical anthropocentric tenets of Western philosophy, particularly that of The Enlightenment. However, he has more to offer. An intense perusal of his narrative would reveal that Conrad, though outwardly showcases the Nature-dominating principles of The Enlightenment, counteractively, does the reverse by effectuating the mocking reversal of man's claims to mastery over Nature. A close look at his narrative—which I prefer to call Conrad's double-helix Nature-narrative—would reveal how these two mutually contradictory and counteractive narrative strands are interestingly intertwined in his Nature-narrative such

that one narrative that is purposely constructed is also subsequently dismantled. In so doing, the novelist seemingly takes an ironic dig at the anti-Nature philosophical principles of The Enlightenment thereby in a way, shaking the bedrocks of Western anthropocentrism—manifest predominantly through the celebration of the human sovereignty over Nature. Such a dismantling act, of course, crucially goes in concurrence with the edifying anti-anthropocentric principles of Ecocriticism that attribute the human being with a humble and subdued position in Nature's vast and intricate biotic life, not a masterful one.

In this context, this article endeavours to disentangle these two perpetually intertwined narrative threads in Conrad's double-stranded man-Nature discourse that initially seemingly construes Enlightenment anthropocentrism on the surface only to be punctured and dismantled, later on, through dissident, anti-anthropocentric underpinnings. The article, in its endeavour to do so, will have a blended structure—like Conrad's twisted narrative itself—where it will first show the construction of the human ego over Nature and then, the following demolition act by the author.

Heart of Darkness

Conrad's magnum opus *Heart of Darkness*, for its succinct elicitation of the man/Nature dialectics, becomes the first important text for the above analysis. The novel, albeit its unremitting engagement with the issues of racial discrimination (as charged by Achebe), also presents itself as a graphic documentary of man's frontal encounter with African Nature which—as the colonizer sees it—is no more than a dumb and deaf, dispirited, non-human 'other.' Marlow's immediate and spontaneous reactions at the sight of the colossal forest is worth mentioning:

> "The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forest was before my eyes. . . . All this was great, expectant, mute. . . . 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).

The passage, in its succinct evocation of the image of Nature as a mute, spiritless and unresponsive 'other,' makes us realize the presence of an age-old, antediluvian conceptual disconnection between man and

Nature—a disconnection that crucially determines the anthropocentric foundation of Western humanism. In addition, as an oafish vindication of the Baconian principles of attacking and vanquishing Nature, we learn that this 'other,' i.e. Nature, also stands ready, as Marlow had informed us beforehand, to be invaded by the colonizers. He narrates: "And outside, the silent wilderness [was] waiting patiently for the passing away of this *fantastic invasion* (emphasis added)" (Conrad, *Heart* 26). It goes without saying that it is a crude and blatant assertion of the Baconian spirit of domination of Nature through a military march into its pristine and ensconced territory by man. Bacon, in a notorious protestation of anthropocentric despotism over Nature, sanctions similar human military march into the former's territory by advising man to "unite forces against the Nature of the Things, to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, and extend the bounds of the human empire" (qtd. in Mathews 32).

Intriguingly however, the text, after such purposeful construals of a thoroughgoing, egomaniac image of man, leads us to a reversive scenario—with the unfolding of the other strand of Conrad's double-helix Nature narrative as mentioned previously—where the intended human domination of Nature is foiled with scathing ridicule and cynicism. The enlightening conviction of Kurtz in his dying moments substantiates such a dramatic turnaround:

> You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—' everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. Everything belonged to him—but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. (Conrad, *Heart* 58)

The passage, while brilliantly contrasting Kurtz's self-acclaimed possession of Nature with his counter-possession by the same, not only demystifies his futile claims to mastery over Nature, but also, makes a scathing caricature of this so-called genius that arouses in us mixed feelings of pity and ridicule for him. In addition, one could also notice that it is a counteracting rebuttal of the Baconian principles of domination and

possession of Nature. Nature's backlash at the pointless human endeavour to master it—convincingly demonstrated through Kurtz's momentous defeat and surrender—is, one could say, a hard setback to the Enlightenment-pioneered human autonomy and omnipotence over Nature. As Ian Watt observes, Kurtz's defeat "enacts one of the ideological lessons of *Heart of Darkness*: that nothing is more dangerous than man's delusions of autonomy and omnipotence" (44).

In another notable instance of Conrad's anti-anthropocentric agenda, we find a compellingly demonstrative picture of man's miniaturization before the all-encompassing visual field of Nature. Marlow, while journeying across River Congo, flanked on both sides by the enormous masses of trees, describes his feelings of being very small and very lost in the following lines:

> 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, and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling" (Conrad, *Heart* 40-41).

Particularly, the last sentence of the quote seems to indicate towards a sort of candid acknowledgement, on the part of the colonizer, (as the feeling of being very small and very lost are not depressing for him), of man's essential and ineluctable puniness before colossal Nature's vast and empyrean ecosphere. It very well coincides with Eco-philosopher Michael Tobias's remark, in the introduction of his book *Deep Ecology*, about mankind's negligible positioning in Nature's empyrean biosphere in which humanity is a mere infinitesimally small part or fragment. Tobias' description of the diminutiveness of mankind before Nature's vastness is fascinating: "From the biosphere's perspective, the whole point of Homo sapiens is their armpits, aswarm with 24.1 billion bacteria" (vii).

So, Conrad's abrupt evocations of these confessionary moods on the part of his protagonists and characters undoubtedly carry the insignia of his anti-anthropocentric narrative denouements. Marlow's unquestioning acceptance of man's puniness before Nature's all-pervading vastness directly contrasts the Conradian characters' otherwise generally haughty, condescending, and discontented engagement with the

same. Through these rare moments of self-defeating declarations on the part of his characters, he looks like enforcing his intended theme of the implicit critique of anthropocentricity.

Lord Jim

Conrad's other notable work *Lord Jim* provides us with more fitting evidences of similar narrative flip-flops in his treatment of the man-Nature conflict. Right from the outset, we encounter a fabricated and vainglorious image of Jim that generates an impression of him as being "as unflinching as a hero in a book" (11) and we learn through many textual evidences and anecdotes that Jim boastfully considers himself as someone who is not only unbeatable by the forces of Nature, but also someone who is its master. However, we learn through a series of subsequent dramatic turn-arounds of events and episodes that Jim finds himself a hapless captive of Nature rather than being its self-styled master. A revelatory passage describing his shifting dynamics with Nature in the island of Patusan would help us unwind the two narrative threads intertwined in Conrad's double-helix man-Nature dialectics:

> He looked with an owner's eye at the peace of the evening, at the river, at the houses, at the everlasting life of the forests, at the life of the old mankind, at the secrets of the land, at the pride of his own heart: but it was they that possessed him and made him their own to the innermost thought, to the slightest stir of blood, to his last breath. (Conrad, *Jim* 188-189)

A close look at the above passage would reveal how Jim's self-excoriated mastery over Nature (at which he looks with an "*owner's eye* (emphasis added)") is immediately and comprehensively dismantled by his complete counter-possession by the former (as seen in the last portion of the quote). Jim's thoroughgoing captivation by Nature makes his self-assumed and differentiated subjectivity break, crumble and dissipate into Nature's all-pervasive enormity. Such collation of the paradoxical figurations of Jim, first, the self-styled master and then, a captivated slave, clearly goes in concurrence with the typical Conradian strategic ploy—as has been reiteratively claimed beforehand—to first expose and then demolish Western anthropocentrism, thoroughgoingly.

At another critical juncture in the text, Jim's captivation by Nature is all the more visible when the narrator informs that he is possessed not only by his beloved Jewel, but also by the entire biotic community of Nature accompanying her: "The land, the people, the forest were her accomplices, guarding him with vigilant accord, with an air of seclusion, of mastery, of invincible possession. There was no appeal as it were; he was imprisoned within the very freedom of his power . . ." (214). This exemplary nullification and reversal of Jim's self-acclaimed command and ascendancy over Nature truly echoes the voice of the pioneer of "land ethic," Aldo Leopold: ". . . that we are plain members and citizens of the land-community, not the rulers of the earth" (240).

This ongoing deconstruction of the Western man's anthropocentric ego is perhaps most effectively demonstrated by the evocation of the image of "fall" of man by Stein who, while reflecting on man's inexorable inclusion in Nature, construes: "A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns . . ." (Conrad, *Jim* 163). Stein's metaphor of "fall" of everyman into the unfathomable depths of the sea seems to be Conrad's suitable literary artifact to underscore the futility of Jim's (and the Western man's for that matter) desperate yearning to transcend the totalising dimensions of Nature and also, to expose the illusory nature of his soaring self-belief. It is significant to note that Conrad, in his personal life as a sea-voyager, sees Nature as a manifestation of eternity and is well aware of man's littleness before its compelling and all-encompassing immensity, as he confesses: "In my early days, starting out on a voyage was like being launched into Eternity" (Gose, Jr 139). The 'fall' that Stein stresses so emphatically on is of course suggestive not only of man's inability to transcend and transgress the all-pervasive enormity of Nature, but also the latter's all-inclusiveness in which humanity is a mere fragmentary part.

Nostromo

Conrads' another famous masterpiece *Nostromo* characteristically wavers between similar narrative undulations of the exposition of anthropocentrism and its subsequent dismantlement. The novel initially explicates how Nature (the Sulaco Valley in particular)—through its instrumental and utilitarian estimation by the colonial man—is conceived as a mere object exposed to the capitalistic western man's possession and exploitation. This can be marked from the cool and dispassionate mechanistic attitude of Sir John and the Engineer-in-chief who had come to survey the Sulaco Valley for forthcoming capitalistic enterprises. It is worth noticing that initially Sir John and the engineer-in-chief are exceedingly overwhelmed by the Sulaco Valley's exquisite scenic beauty; yet, that spontaneous joy proves to be momentary and is immediately eclipsed by "all the indifference of a man of affairs to Nature" (Conrad, *Nostromo* 39). Moreover, as a mark of the typical 'commoditizing everything' tendency of capitalism, the narrator conceives of the land of Costaguana to be no more than a "bottomless pit" exposed to European investments and foreign intrusions. He boasts: "Now, what is Costaguana? It is the bottomless pit of 10 percent loans and other fool investments. European capital had been flung into it with both hands for years" (Conrad, *Nostromo* 76-77). It is, of course, redolent of the idiosyncratic human way of seeing Nature as an object meant for human exploitation in a way, as the Enlightenment philosopher Descartes would assert, that men "render . . . [themselves] as the lords and possessors of nature" (78).

The derogation of Nature perhaps finds its abominable low through its conceptualization as a mute entity meant for forcible disclosure by the European capitalistic ventures. The narrator describes: "[The coloniser] with each day's journey, seemed to come nearer to the soul of the land in the tremendous disclosure of this interior . . ., a great land of plain and mountain . . ., suffering and mute, waiting for the future in a pathetic immobility of patience" (Conrad, *Nostromo* 88).

Curiously though, things take a startling overturn when after such premeditated rendering of the egocentric image of man over Nature, Conrad leads us towards a scenario, at a later part of the text, where such anthropocentric prefabrications are indeed sabotaged by an anti-anthropocentric counter-narrative

employed by him. The artifact of this prototypical Conradian dismantling act is Dr. Monygham, the medical officer of the San Tome mine. Propelled by an edifying "misanthropic mistrust of mankind" (Conrad, *Nostromo* 432), he is visibly frank and candid in wholeheartedly admitting man's nullity in Nature's empyrean ecosphere. Though Nostromo is some kind of a hero for him and he holds his intrepid character in high esteem, he is aware of the tininess and defenselessness of man before Nature— a conviction that springs from the realisation of his own inability to confront the same. The narrator describes:

> In this Dr. Monygham was sincere. He esteemed highly the intrepidity of that man [Nostromo], whom he valued but little, being disillusioned as to mankind in general, because of the particular instance in which his own manhood had failed. Having had to encounter single-handed during his period of eclipse many physical dangers, he was well aware of the most dangerous element common to them all: of the crushing, paralysing sense of human littleness, which is what really defeats a man struggling with natural forces, alone far from the eyes of his fellows. (Conrad, *Nostromo* 433)

The passage is another clear instance of the typical Conradian narrative turnaround through which he exposes the "crushing and paralyzing sense of human littleness" before the indomitable forces of Nature. Apart from Dr. Monygham, Martin Decoud also has similar experiences. In a self-defeating tone that negates anthropocentric despotism over Nature, the narrator describes how it takes possession of the self, mind and spirit of men. In his words:

> It [Nature] takes possession of the mind, . . . Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature. In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. (Conrad, *Nostromo* 497).

Decoud's self-defeating confessions are ironic reversals of The Enlightenment principle of the man-Nature dualism—or, its corresponding, Descartesian mind/body dualism stated earlier—where man claims to possess the qualities of mind while Nature, bereft of such qualities, is conceived as a mere body or

insubstantial matter. But here, Nature's act of possession of Decoud's mind alters the scenario while concurrently negating a seclusive and distinctive identity that the enlightened modern man has assumed for himself for his lone possession of the Descartesian mind or spirit. It seems that Conrad enforces onto his probably hesitant characters a merger with the "more-than-human-world[2]" (Heise 61) of Nature at all levels—both physical and psychic.

Moreover, the master-slave dichotomy between man and Nature further receives a serious jolt through Martin Decoud's self-imagined reduction into the status of a slave before Nature. His final submission to Nature after a futile struggle with the same is finely noted by the narrator as: "He sat down on the soft earth, unresisting, as if he had been chained to the treasure, his drawn-up legs clasped in his hands with an air of hopeless submission like a slave set on ground" (Conrad, *Nostromo* 495). It needs mentioning here that Conrad in his letter to his friend R. B. Cunninghame Graham, while explaining a similar universal context of man's perpetual submission before Nature, describes man as a self-conscious slave of Nature, not its master. He writes: "What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well—but as soon as you know of your slavery the pain, the anger, the strife—the tragedy begins" (70). A wholehearted admission of such magnitude, on the part of Conrad, can be taken to be an implicit, unconscious negation on his part of the Baconian metaphor of man's mastery over Nature.

An Outcast of the Islands

Conrad's early Malayan tale *An Outcast of the Islands*, like many other texts discussed beforehand, effectuates the initial exposition and subsequent nullification of anthropocentrism through the intermittent rise and fall of the protagonist Willems' ego and fortune. This is done through his exclusion from the latter's biotic sphere—an expulsion that works as a just nemesis for the conceited modern man. Considering himself to be "an extraordinary character in an ordinary world" (Carroll 52), the novel's protagonist Willems always harbours in him a masterful attitude towards the Malayan Nature. Like a typical enlightened modern man who thought he could conquer Nature through the knowledge and understanding of its operation, Willems is

"ferociously conceited" and believes "in his genius and his knowledge of the world" (Conrad, *Outcast* 21) and is believed to be able to, as Captain Lingard puts it, disturb "the harmony of the universe" (Conrad, *Outcast* 147) as and when he wishes.

Interestingly however, his self-proclaimed ascendancy over Nature and its elements turns into utter defeat and despair as the narrator fittingly notes that "it was only himself that seemed to be left outside the scheme of creation" (Conrad, *Outcast* 58)—an altered scenario where the self-styled master of the universe becomes a destitute outcast.

Additionally, the narrator's scathing portrayal of Willems as a mere "grain of dust," in the course of his fight with the unconquerable forces of Nature, adds to the archetypal Conradian subversion of anthropocentrism. The narrator describes:

> And under the . . . branches outspread wide above his head, . . ., he tossed like a grain of dust in a whirlwind—sinking and rising—round and round— . . . . All through the languid stillness of that night he fought with the impalpable; he fought with the shadows, with the darkness, with the silence. He fought without a sound, striking futile blows, dashing from side to side; obstinate, hopeless, and always beaten back; like a man bewitched within the invisible sweep of a magic circle. (Conrad, *Outcast* 115)

This quote from the text, in a nutshell, is the saga of the defeated modern man before the unassailable forces of Nature. Its tone and spirit ironically reveal a startling subversion of the Enlightenment principles by flaunting the deplorable plight of the modern man caught inescapably in Nature's invisible circle. A passage cited below would substantiate the foiling of the Baconian principles of the human domination over Nature through Willems' incarceration in the former's metaphysical prison house:

> He saw the horrible from among the big trees, in the network of creepers in the fantastic outlines of leaves, that seemed to be so many enormous hands with big, broad palms, with stiff fingers outspread to lay hold of him . . . to take him, to enlace him, to strangle him, to hold him till he died; hands that would hold him dead, that would never let go, that would cling to his

> body forever till it is perished—disappeared in their frantic and tenacious grasp" (Conrad, *Outcast* 222-3).

The metaphysical incarceration of Willems by Nature can be taken to be the symbolic nullification of the Baconian myth of man's enslavement of Nature through the latter's capture and vanquishment by the former. The passage, thus while abrogating the Baconian anthropocentric military metaphor of the conquest of Nature, brings under scanner, under attack and under reversion the prevailing anthropocentric principles of certain strands of Western philosophy. What is foregrounded here is a certain sense of defeat, surrender, loss of footing, and dispossession on the part of the Western man—a scenario that echoes the voice of Aldo Leopold in his famous "Land Ethic" where he proclaims: "In human history, we have learned (I hope) that conqueror role is eventually self-defeating" (257). Willems' fall can be said to be what William Rueckert, in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," would call a tragic flaw of the enlightened and conceited modern man. He says: "In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing" (113).

Conclusion

In the end, it can be ascertained that Conrad, in his colonial novels, performs both an exposition and critique of Western anthropocentrism. John G. Peters in his book *Conrad and Impressionism* critically acknowledges the novelist's rejection of anthropocentrism, which, of course, unquestionably forms the very foundation and crux of Western humanism. Peters convincingly remarks: ". . . western civilization in particular comes under Conrad's scrutiny, and since the popular view of western civilization at the time conceived it to be based upon an absolute foundation [of anthropocentrism], Conrad's epistemology strikes directly at the foundation" (5). Thus, Conrad finally achieves what Dominic Head would call "the deprivileging [of] the human subject" and concomitantly, the disillusionment of the human being's self-proclaimed ascendancy over Nature. In addition, he inculcates an anti-Enlightenment and anti-anthropocentric world-view thereby vindicating his stated claim of Nature's autonomy and omnipotence along with man's puniness before the former's all-pervasive enormity. This paper, it is believed, helps us unravel certain unrealized dimensions of Conrad's

writing where he achieves the double purpose of both exposing and deconstructing the ego of man against Nature. Moreover, his writing seems to exude an implicit moral teaching that suggests for a paradigm shift in man's flawed perception of Nature so that he sees the same not as an "other," rather as something to which he belongs.

Notes:

1-Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood is of the opinion that Descartes' famous mind/body dualism actually leads to the generation of several other associative dualisms like man/Nature, culture/Nature etc. through what she calls "linking postulates" (45). Such dualisms are logically connected to each other in a way such that man becomes equivalent to mind or culture whereas Nature becomes the representative of body.

2-See Heise, Ursula. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Here Heise argues that some environmentalist thinkers prefer the phrase "more-than-human world" to the more conventional phrase like "nonhuman environment" to effectively de-emphasize the boundary between the human and non-human parts of the life-world. The term has become immensely popular after the publication of David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous* that is broadly based on the Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of man's relation with Nature.

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