

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* : Negotiating Space for the Women

ASIT K. BISWAS

My purpose in this article is to evaluate the roles played by the women characters in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, and to show, contrary to the general view, that the women in the novel may and do serve to give more meaning to the text than they are supposed to do. I have taken into the purview of my critical analysis only three of the women-Marlow's old aunt, Kurtz's Intended, and his African Mistress. I have kept the two receptionists in the Company's office in Brussels aside, primarily because the "Two women, one fat and the other slim,(who) sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool" (Conrad 31) are mostly symbolic abstractions and have very little to add to the probable total meanings of the novel. The 'compassionate secretary' who made Marlow sign some documents in the Brussels office and who may possibly be a woman is also not considered on the same ground.

There is a general critical consensus that the world of Joseph Conrad's fictions is basically a male-dominated world. The colonial adventures, imperial businesses, hazardous navigations, startling explorations and such other activities and experiences which usually construct the plots of most of the novels and short stories of Conrad were, in fact, the concerns of men, not of women, in the late Victorian society. The Victorian women were happy with their immediate domestic-social realities, and had only vague and idealistically formed views about the larger external issues such as colonial-imperial activities. Therefore, in Conrad's novels the women characters are fewer in number and are almost nowhere found to occupy the centre-stage, controlling or shaping the plot. They are made to appear at the peripheries and are allowed to play only secondary roles. They are never found to either be equal to or at least very close to the important positions given to their male counterparts.

Heart of Darkness is, by no means, any exception to this fact about the position of the female characters in Conrad. Brinda Bose

*Reader, Dept. of English, Bankura Christian College.

in her introduction to the Oxford edition of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* observes :

Women, to begin with, are hard to come by at the centre of this male colonial enterprise. Even at the peripheries where they roam, the roles they are given are problematic. Not only are Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's African woman and his Intended ultimately powerless in the colonial exercise that the men carry out, they are satirized by the colonial male for misguided perceptions of 'the idea'. (Bose 14)

Such a view of the women in *Heart of Darkness* is not at all rare. Most other critics are of the view that Conrad has given only pyrrhic and peripheral roles to his female characters in *Heart of Darkness*. In fact, it is assumed that Conrad had a great weakness in depicting women in a convincing manner. We may refer to the words of P. O'Prey in his 'Introduction' to *Heart of Darkness* :

Heart of Darkness ... avoids what is Conrad's greatest fault, his inability to create convincing women characters, by keeping its only two women (Conrad's aunt and Kurtz's 'Intended') in the background. (O'Prey 22)

This so called 'greatest fault' of Conrad, 'his inability to create convincing women characters', is perhaps a myth, not a reality. True, we hardly get any well drawn, fully developed, woman character in Conrad. The women characters are mostly sketchy, incomplete, and may even be sometimes called symbolic abstractions. But an absence of a fully developed woman character in Conrad's novels is not necessarily or convincingly a proof of his inability or failure to create such a character. Had he ever attempted to create a woman character elaborately and then failed to make the character convincing to the readers, the question of failure might occur. But we cannot find fault with Conrad and criticise him for something which he never attempted to do.

In fact, with Conrad's practice of fiction writing there is hardly any scope of creating a fully developed woman character. Unlike the Victorian novelists and most of the modern fiction writers, Conrad is concerned with themes and experiences of mostly an external, male dominated world. As a sailor, the prime time of

Conrad's youth was spent on the seas and oceans, away from the sophisticated English society. Again, as one born in Poland, he had no earlier idea of the British society. Hence it would have been impossible for him to write on the social themes or problems of the Victorian England. And he never, quite judiciously, attempted to do it. He has discarded the Victorian social realism, and turned his eyes to colonial-imperial exercises which he watched and scanned from a very close quarter. And he has adopted a symbolic-impressionistic-critical mode of narration to explore the inner realities of the world he presents in his novels. *Heart of Darkness* is a novel of this category, and therefore the women characters in the novel are so sketchy and apparently under-developed. In the novel itself the novelist makes his spokesman Marlow say that the women hardly have any role to play in the colonial exercises. They are kept out of it.

It is thus evident that in *Heart of Darkness* the absence of a fully developed woman character is not due to any fault on the part of Conrad such as his inability to build up one, but because the theme of *Heart of Darkness* can hardly allow any such character without the risk of making the whole novel unrealistic. A woman character set at the centre of all imperialistic-colonial activities would only be unreal and therefore unconvincing. Thus if the women characters like the aunt and the Intended who really have no close association with the basic theme of the novel were given more space or attention, they would certainly have impressed us as superfluous and highly fictitious. Conrad had to keep them in low profiles to highlight the colonial exercises which form the main theme of the novel realistically.

But the three women characters in *Heart of Darkness* (Marlow's old aunt, Kurtz's Intended and his African Mistress) are not so simple or unimportant as they apparently seem to be. Conrad has no doubt placed them in the peripheries of the main activities in the novel because they are naturally aloof from its central actions. Still, the characters are by no means ill-drawn or utterly peripheral. By subtle suggestions, symbolic significances, and meaningful contrasts Conrad has made them impressive and unforgettable. What's more, they serve to give more meaning to the text and also help understanding or exploring the characters placed in the centre (i.e. Kurtz and Marlow). In the following section of this article, I will try to explain why or how these three women characters in the novel really deserve more critical attention than they are given so far.

The three women characters in *Heart of Darkness* fall under two categories - the civilized Europeans and the savage African. Thus the three characters are set to provide a sharp cultural contrast between the two continents so far as the feminine emotions, sentiments, and sexuality are concerned. Conrad himself has suggested an ironic contrast between the European and the African women by the painting of Kurtz which was left in the Central Station of the company. It was the picture of a "woman, draped and blind-folded carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre - almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torch-light on the face was sinister" (Conrad 46-47). The picture is highly symbolic, and the symbolic significance of the picture has been beautifully analysed by a critic in the following terms:

Europe, symbolized by the Intended, in Africa, symbolized by darkness--but, the torch will be quenched, the blind woman swallowed whole. Marlow did not really lie: the last words Kurtz pronounced were, in part, in reference to his symbolic model within his symbolic picture. (Kimbrough 415)

Again of the two Europeans, one is old and the other young. The two may thus serve to show another contrast--a contrast between the old and the young generations of European women. Very interestingly the two have a strange similarity at least in one point, and that is their absolute ignorance of the reality of colonialism. The aunt believes that Marlow is going to join a grand mission, that he has on his shoulders the 'whiteman's burden' of civilizing the savage Africans. She has taken him as "Something like an emissary of light". The Intended has also an equally unalterable view about Kurtz. For her, Kurtz's 'noble heart' was dedicated to a noble mission, and his death is a great loss to the world: "What a loss to me--to us!" --she corrected herself with beautiful generosity; then added in a murmur, "To the world". (Conrad 103)

The readers can see the huge gap between the grim realities of colonialism as presented in the novel and the false, idealized views of the aunt and the Intended about colonial activities. Marlow's impression about his 'excellent aunt' after he meets her before going to Africa beautifully sums up the actual scene :

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over. (Conrad 33-34)

Conrad's presentation of the two European women as 'out of touch with truth' is brief but realistic. The aunt and the Intended, the old and the young, give us a perfect glimpse at the condition of the women in the late Victorian England. They were 'blessed' with the joy of ignorance and were confined in the artificial world of their false ideas and ideals, without any knowledge of the realities of colonialism and rapid industrialization of the time. The two women in the novel may thus be studied as representing the Victorian world of women as a foil to the world of men, that is the world of trade and commerce, of deception, hypocrisy and exploitation. One may wonder how Conrad allows only a little space to the women in the actual text, but leaves a huge space to derive meaning from.

Marlow's aunt who managed the job for him in the Belgian Limited Company for Trade in the Upper Congo, and that too within a very short time, represents great power, the power of the women over men. She has no idea of the colonial rules, but she has an effective power over those who rule the colonies. Her role in the novel may otherwise be peripheral, but here in getting the job for Marlow she no doubt plays a pivotal role. Marlow recalls how "She was determined to make no end fuss to get me (Marlow) appointed skipper, of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy" (Conrad 29). Her success in managing the job for Marlow remains as a necessary precondition for what we get in the novel about colonial-imperial activities in Africa, and about the evil lurking deep in the mind of man.

The women characters in the novel are all, quite meaningfully, made nameless. They are thus denied of their individual identities and made known only in terms of their relations or associations with some men, namely Marlow and Kurtz in the present context. Thus they are made peripheral, or minor characters as the tale demands them to be. Conrad might also have desired his women characters

to represent different classes of women, symbolically, instead of individuated beings. Nina Pelikan Straus observes :

It is Conrad's text itself that stimulates the notion that the psychic penury of women is a necessary condition for the heroism of men, and whether or not *Heart of Darkness* is a critique of male heroism or is in complex complicity with it, gender dichotomy is an inescapable element of it. (Straus 179)

This observation of Straus may be studied meaningfully in connection with Conrad's presentation of Kurtz's Intended. The lady has been portrayed as one who is weak, mournful, and almost fragile in her grief for Kurtz. Marlow meets her after more than one year of Kurtz's death, but Kurtz's memory is still fresh in her mind. Marlow informs us that "she seemed as though she would remember and mourn for ever"(Conrad 101). Marlow's presentation of the Intended only confirms what Nina Straus calls her 'psychic penury':

She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering. The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. Their glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful. She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, I-I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves. (Conrad 101).

Her knowledge, the reader knows, is far from being true knowledge. Marlow's speech becomes ironic, for she has no knowledge of what Kurtz really deserves. This ignorance is her 'psychic penury' and it, Nina Straus rightly suggests, keeps up 'male heroism'. The heroic image of Kurtz in the heart of the Intended remains unaltered because of her lack of true knowledge. Marlow, who may be described as the un-illusioned (or 'diillusioned') man of the colonial realities, only helps to maintain or rather 'strengthen' this 'penury' or ignorance of the Intended. The false glory of colonialism is allowed to be retained in the minds of those who are away from its realities. How

can Marlow being a part of and also a party to that dark reality puncture the balloon of colonial idealism by revealing the truth? Hence he had to lie to the Intended and say, "The last word he (Kurtz) pronounced was-your name". (Conrad 104)

It is very important to note that Conrad does not end the novel immediately after Marlow's return from his voyage, but allows Marlow's narrative to be extended till his meeting with the Intended after a period of more than one year. Conrad's inclusion of the episode of Marlow's meeting with the Intended into the main design of the novel is suggestive of its indispensability as well as of the importance of the character of the intended in the novel. The Intended, an otherwise marginalized character, here throws much light into the main theme of the novel. The hypocrisy associated essentially with colonial activities is exposed and emphasized further by the Intended. Ian Watt in his essay "*Heart of Darkness* and Nineteenth Century Thought" observes:

... Marlow at the end finds himself forced to lie to her about Kurtz. One reason is that if he told the truth she would not have the necessary grounds in her own experience to be able to understand it; another is that since for all his seeking Marlow himself has found no faith which will move mountains, his nostalgia inclines him to cherish the faith that ignores them. (Watt 84)

Marlow's intense introspection and experiences about colonization in the Congo Africa make him realize its hollowness. He fails to form any positive opinion about it and also can hold no faith on it. Hence he hardly had anything tributary to speak to the Intended about Colonial activities, and he had to lie.

Judged from another point of view, Marlow's lying to the Intended may have another significance. It seems to finger at the actual direction to which colonialism should have been led. The idealized view of the Intended that her hero Kurtz has been in the wild Africa as an 'emissary of light' to civilize the uncivilized Africans should have been the actuality about colonialism. But the greed of the white Europeans who act as the agents of colonization have perverted the humanitarian possibilities and philanthropic application of colonial activities to really improve the conditions of

the savage natives. The character of the Intended with her ignorance about the grim reality of colonialism is perhaps Conrad's way of showing us what colonization should have done, and what it has actually achieved. Her sacrifice-her repression of womanhood or sexuality, her lifelong unprized waiting for Kurtz-is not simply a sacrifice for the love of an individual, but rather for a philanthropic ideal. And it is this ideal that can give her the strength of mind to live the rest of her life alone. We should mark her conviction when she says :

It is possible that all this should be lost--that such a life should be sacrificed to leave nothing--but sorrow. You know what vast plans he had. I knew of them, too--I could not perhaps understand--but others knew of them. Something must remain. His words, at least, have not died. (Conrad 103)

Marlow finds no other way but to admit and confirm her conviction. He should have felt what the colonizers ought to have done. The Intended acts as a further eye-opener to Marlow, and thus completes his enlightenment. In his expedition into the wild Congo-Africa Marlow had the experience of seeing the ugly faces of colonization from a very close quarter. And the Intended at the end seem to show him the intended philanthropic face of colonization. Thus the character of the Intended, though placed in the periphery, adds new meaning and significance to the central theme of the novel.

And now we may have a look at the very briefly, but intensely and powerfully portrayed character of the native woman, Kurtz's African Mistress. Conrad has presented her in sharp contrast with the Intended. C.B.Cox observes:

If we compare this splendid savage with Kurtz's European fiancée, his Intended, it may seem that we are setting side by side dynamic energy with sterile hypocrisy, life with death. The savage is tragic and fierce; we may take it for granted that Kurtz has enjoyed sexual orgies with her in his role as a worshipped god to whom human sacrifices are offered. Her Dionysiac passions might seem more attractive in their vitality than the living tomb the Intended has created for herself in Brussels. (Cox 29-30)

While the Intended is "totally protected (helpless), rhetorically programmed (words without matter), unlike in her adoration (sexually repressed), living in black, in a place of darkness, in a pre-Eliot City of the Dead, in the Wasteland of modern Europe" (Kimbrough, 410), the African Mistress is 'savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent', emotive, 'stunningly coiffured' and also restrained. The rare combination of 'restrain' ('She walked with measured steps') and explosion of 'pent up passion' ('Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky...') makes her at once captivating. Kurtz was bewitched by her wild beauty and spirit. Her charm is even enhanced by the pain of immediate separation which cast its shadow on her face as Marlow observes :

Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. (Conrad 87)

Marlow here equates her with African wilderness which may invite a number of connotations. And if she is so, she is the target of European lust and is destined to be ravaged and exploited sexually as the country is being illegally captured and looted by the greedy colonizers. Kimbrough seems to emphasize this very thing when he comments :

The Native Woman is Africa, all interior, in spite of her lavish mode of dress. While Kurtz is male, white, bald, oral, unrestrained, the native woman is female, black, stunningly coiffured, emotive, and restrained ... Africa, yes, but she is also Tellus Mater, Amazon, Dido, and a type of Venus. Kurtz is clearly a kind of Mars. While this does not mean that the arrows shot through the pilot-house door come from their son Cupid, these arrows are, however, a fine example of the phallic futility of a relationship which has none of the creativity and bonding of love, only love's hate and anger. Kurtz's lustful exploitation of the woman, then, is rape, just as were his raids in the lake region, just as was the fantastic invasion of Africa by Christian, capitalistic western civilization --and its discontents. (Kimbrough 410-411)

The Woman, no doubt, has in herself the tragic dignity of the Carthagian Queen Dido. Again her well-armed appearance with hair 'done in the shape of a helmet', with 'brass leggings to the knee' and 'brass wire gauntlets to the elbow' along with a potential seductiveness may immediately represent her as the 'Amazonian stereotype'. But this resemblance will also indicate her 'potentially corrupting force'. She can allure and ruin. Kurtz was irresistibly attracted to her bewitching wild beauty, submitted himself unconditionally to her wilderness and was consequently ruined. His European sophistication, his education and learning can hardly save him from the destructive allure of the wilderness.

Anthony Fothergill suggests yet another possibility in connection with the character of this native woman. Fothergill concentrates on the word 'apparition' used by Marlow to describe the woman: "And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous *apparition* (Italics mine) of a woman." (Conrad 86) The word 'apparition', according to Fothergill, is quite intriguing if we keep in mind the physical presence of the woman. It helps creating a sense of 'ambiguity' about her state of existence, that very 'ambiguity' or 'unearthliness' that is an indispensable part of the African wilderness. Fothergill comments:

She (the native woman/Kurtz's African Mistress) mirrors the wilderness and bodies forth its sexual threat. I would suggest, in other words, that 'apparition' might alert us to the notion that for all her physicality she is an imaginative space (like the blank map?) onto which Marlow can inscribe the meanings of the European male gaze, while at the same time he can pass these meanings off as the inherent qualities of the object gazed at. (Fothergill, 77)

Kurtz's African Mistress is quite unique from another point of view. The central theme of *Heart of Darkness* is framed out of the experiences of the novelist during his real expedition into the Congo Africa. But the black natives of Africa are not found to possess any operative or strategically important role in the novel. The natives are mostly treated in a generalised way. Sometimes they are also made to appear as symbolic abstractions. They are not individuated. There is no fully developed native character-male or female-in the novel.

This fact found in the novel might have prompted Chinua Achebe to comment that Conrad has only used:

Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering Europe enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. (Achebe 256)

Achebe's criticism of Conrad for eliminating the 'African as human factor', or of presenting no 'recognizable humanity' among the natives is not undisputedly acceptable if we take into consideration the character of Kurtz's African Mistress. It is true that she is given no name. It is also true that her identity is subordinated to the identity of the white European, Kurtz. Still she is the only native in the entire novel who achieves her own identity. She is not to be generalized with other Africans. She is individuated by the public show of her pent up emotion and a unique expression of her anguished self. She hardly requires a name to make herself indelibly imbedded into the minds of the readers. Her strange appearance, ambiguity, unearthliness, and wild passion are enough to haunt a serious minded reader.

References

- Achebe, Chinua. 1988. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*". *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: W.W.Norton & Company.
- Bose, Brinda. 2001. (ed). Joseph Conrad *Heart of Darkness*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Conrad, Joseph. 2001. *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Brinda Bose. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Cox, C.B. 2003. "Heart of Darkness : A Choice of Nightmares". *Modern Critical Interpretations, Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Delhi: Worldview. First Indian reprint..
- Fothergill, Anthony. 2003. *Heart of Darkness*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Ltd. First Indian Edition.
- Kimbrough, Robert. 1988. "Conrad's Youth (1902) : An Introduction". *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: W.W.Norton & Company.
- O'Prey, P. 1983.(ed). Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Penguin.
- Straus, Nina Pelikan. 2001. "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing". *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Brinda Bose. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Watt, Ian. 2003. "Heart of Darkness and Nineteenth Century Thought". *Modern Critical Interpretations, Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Delhi: Worldview. First Indian reprint.