

Backdrop, Woman, Being- Portrayal of Woman in Conrad, Achebe and Ghosh

- Vikarun Nessa

Abstract: *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh charts colonial settings at different times. To most of the post colonial critics and readers, the most prominent issue in these three novels seem to be, oppression of a race by another race or destruction of an organic culture and a unified nation. But this article aims to present, what got marginalized- position of women in different colonial settings. In Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*; women are just in the backdrop, not complete entities. In Achebe's celebrated novel; *Things Fall Apart*, women are just women, not 'beings'. In Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines*, female characters are more developed than the aforementioned two texts. However in *The Shadow Lines* too stereotyping of female characters is seen. So, this article not only wants to present different positions of women in colonial setting but also wants to show how women are doubly subaltern in colonial and post colonial settings.

Keywords: Backdrop, women, being, colonial, post colonial, subaltern.

I

To most colonial readers and critics *Heart of Darkness* charts the different aspects of colonialism and racism. *Things Fall Apart* depicts the fall of an organic culture and a notional hero due to colonial enterprise. *The Shadow lines* showcases the diasporic dilemma of the characters of the novel. While, the plot moves forward in all the above mentioned novels, male characters find prominence but female characters get marginalized. They are 'subalterns' among "subalterns". The term subaltern was adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to "those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic' power" (Ashcroft et al, 2004 p.215). This article aims to show how in *Heart of Darkness*; *Things Fall Apart* and *The Shadow lines* women are 'doubly subaltern' 'backdrops' of a colonial, patriarchal society women are not regarded as 'beings' and are simulacra. In *Postmodernism for Beginners*, simulacra is defined as "copies of real objects or events" (2007, p.48). In this article the word simulacra is used to refer to colonial and post colonial women. Because, most of the time colonial and post colonial women lack detail in their portrayal and they are stereotyped.

II

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* women have no significant role other than being symbols or backdrops. Female characters are symbols of 'exotic' Africa and 'civilized' Europe. Cedric Watts's remark is illuminating here, "some of Conrad's women are associated with the jungle, dark and

fecund, while others are linked to statues, imposing and beautiful” (1993, p.177). Firstly, one very significant example of an 'exotic' backdrop is Kurtz's African mistress. Kurtz's mistress is primarily used in the text to give Africa a halo of mystery and exoticness. Secondly, she also serves as a foil character and a sharp contrast to Kurtz's European fiancé. The 'dark force' of Kurtz's mistress conveys the picture of a 'monstrous', 'evil' and 'pitiless' Africa. She is described in terms of the jungle, “she stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose” (Conrad, 1973, p.101). The narrative is telling the readers that, she does not care that her dying lover is being taken away from her, she is as 'still and dark' as the continent itself. Conrad equates her with the foliage of the primitive jungle. On the other hand, Kurtz's intended is the exact opposite to his African mistress. Her devotion for Kurtz is unflinching. When Marlow visits her more than a year after Kurtz's death, she is still mourning. Her 'constructed' assessment of Kurtz is so high that Marlow fails to speak of “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad, 1973, p.27). Kurtz's Fiancé helps to elaborate the concept of appearance and reality. She is not unlike other Europeans who live under a 'constructed' notion that, Europe or Europe as represented by Kurtz is serving Africa to become civilized. This so called civilizing mission is much talked about in colonial and post colonial discourse. However, this article does not focus on colonialism; its focus is on colonial women. In this context, this article aims to show that , both Kurtz's fiancé and his African mistress serve as 'backdrops' on which the values and wealth of the respective societies are displayed. The portrayal of these two female characters lack detail. Conrad is using the female characters as site on which African and European cultures are reflected, the tragedy of the female characters is that, they have no other function in the construction of the narrative. They are sheer symbols who do not have any active presence in the narrative structure of the novel.

III

Heart of Darkness and *Things Fall Apart* are closely linked. Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* as a reaction to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* because Achebe found Conrad a 'racist' in his treatment of Africa and Africans. Though Achebe is writing back he is not trying to glorify Africa falsely. He is depicting Africa, its people, customs, tradition, religion even superstitions as they are. And this is exactly the attitude that is found in Achebe's treatment of women in the novel. Portrayal of African women is based on truth and the treatment of women in the novel can be divided into two parts; firstly, conventional treatment of women. Secondly, unconventional treatment of women, regarding the fact that they live in a patriarchal, colonized society. In discussing the 'conventional' treatment of women, a quote from *Things Fall Apart* could summarize the view a patriarchal society has about women, Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel thinks, “No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man” (Achebe, 1962, p.37). This statement summarizes the treatment

of women in Ibo society. The use of the word "rule" disturbs a conscious reader as, women in Ibo society do not need to be respected or loved, and they are subservient beings who need to be ruled in this patriarchal society to give a man his medallion of manliness. As such women are doubly subaltern as they are ruled not only by men but also ruled by the colonial enterprise. Discrimination against women lies in every layer of Ibo society, even in agriculture. Okonkwo thinks about his past in chapter three of the novel and thinks how in the past he had to support his entire family including his father. He thinks his mother and sisters "worked hard enough" (Achebe, 1962, p.16) but they only grew feminine crops, like coco-yams, cassava etcetera but "Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop" (Achebe, 1962, p.16). Here we have to remember that "yam" is Ibo people's staple food and by making it a man's crop, Ibo men are given control and power over women. Though, Okonkwo is a strong character, morally and physically but he is severely flawed when it comes to women. In the narrative we see that Okonkwo beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo, for not cooking food on time during the "week of peace". We are told through the narrative that Okonkwo was "provoked to justifiable anger" (Achebe, 1962, p. 21). He gets punished for his offence only because he broke the peace of the "week of peace" and not because he beats his wife 'mercilessly' because that is just a 'norm' in this society. And for an offence which seems so 'grave' to a sensible reader, the narrative informed that Okonkwo, "Inwardly, he was repentant" (Achebe, 1962, p.22). Public repentance over beating women is a 'crime' in Ibo society.

In the novel Okonkwo's favorite child is Ezinma, his daughter by his second wife Ekwefi, but he rarely shows his love for Ezinma. He contemplates about Ezinma, he says twice "she should have been a boy" (Achebe, 1962, p. 44) "she has the right spirit" (Achebe, 1962, p.46). Okonkwo is thinking in this fashion because Ezinma is not like other children, she is intelligent and curious. Okonkwo mourns the death of these attributes in Ezinma because in Ibo society these attributes are only ascribed to men. Women are not supposed to be intelligent and even if they are it's of no use either for them or Ibo society. In chapter eight of the novel we see that one of Okonkwo's friend's daughters is getting married. The suitor and his relatives have come to 'judge' her. The going to be bride is sixteen and "just ripe for marriage" (Achebe, 1962, p.49). The use of the word "ripe" needs special attention from readers, this is not Shakespeare's "ripeness is all" (1997, p.244). The going to be bride is not judged from an intellectual standpoint but from a purely physical standpoint. She is reduced to the level of an object by the patriarchal Ibo society, not a 'being'. In the Ibo society portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* everything strong and fine is connected to men and anything soft and weak is connected to women. We see that Okonkwo does not approve of his son Nwoye very much. He feels Nwoye is soft and feminine and likes stories told by women. When Nwoye gets a hint of his father's disapproval of his actions, he 'feigns' not to like the stories told by women anymore. Okonkwo thinks that his mother's stories were silly as stories by all women

are. As Ibo society is ruled by patriarchy Nwoye cannot even like women's stories if he wants to be called a man. It feels like everything feminine is 'taboo' in Ibo society. During the course of the narrative we come to know that even crime is of two kinds; male and female. Female crime of course is the lesser one. Okonkwo commits a female crime by killing Ezeudu's son, because he did not mean to kill the boy. That's why he can return to his fatherland after an exile of seven years. As mentioned before in this article, Achebe's narration is devoid of both hyperbolic exaggeration and understatements about Africa and its native inhabitants. He presents Ibo society as it truly is. In this context, in some parts of the narrative we see treatment of women which is bit different than what it should be in a 'typical' patriarchal society. Very early in the narrative readers are informed that (one of Okonkwo's tribe's woman) a woman is killed when she goes to the neighboring market place. Though, it's a sad incident it tells us that in Ibo society women are not bound to the household only. They can go out, moreover; they can take part in business.

Readers are also informed that Umuofia is feared by its neighboring clans because it possesses a very powerful medicine. And the active principle behind this medicine is supposed to be a one –legged woman, who has a shrine in the village. She is almost a deity. Readers also see that the oracle of the hills and caves is served by a priestess not a priest. In a patriarchal order where chastity plays a big role, Okonkwo does accept Ekwefi, who was married once before she started living with Okonkwo. Ekwefi didn't marry Okonkwo before her first marriage because Okonkwo was unable to pay her bride price. Ekwefi leaves her first husband after two years of their married life and comes to live with Okonkwo. Okonkwo accepts her; this shows his open mindedness and his love for Ekwefi. However, it can be argued that Okonkwo only accepts Ekwefi because she was considered the village beauty. Moreover, when Okonkwo is in exile and he takes refuge in his motherland and one of his relatives informs him of one of the commonest name that is given to children, “Nneka” or “Mother is supreme” (Achebe, 1962, p.94). Because no matter how harsh a father or fatherland is, mother or motherland always provides shelter. That's why Ibo people worship the earth as a Goddess and as a mother. However, here too, the readers can argue that supremacy given to women is only a norm and is not translated into action. Even though, there are some exceptions, treatment of women in *Things Fall Apart* is conventional. It is similar to treatment of women in any other patriarchal society. But we do find subtle hints from the author in his use of words like “rule”, “ripe” that Achebe does not approve of this 'subaltern' condition of women. He doesn't want his readers to accept this condition of women; rather, he wants the readers to be appalled by the subaltern condition of women and possibly bring about a change.

IV

Fakrul Alam in his influential work *Imperial Entanglements and literature in English*, observes that the plot of *The Shadow Lines* “involves people who are traveling across borders and over space ceaselessly while its unnamed

narrator takes it upon himself to crisscross history and nations to chronicle the way lives intersect throughout history and across continents”(2007, p.316). So, it can be understood that the unnamed male narrator is the key factor who binds the narrative structure of *The Shadow Lines* together. However, Ghosh assigns importance to other characters of the novel as well. Two of such very prominent characters are, Tha'mma and Ila. Unlike the female characters of *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*, Tha'mma and Ila neither serve the narrative structure of *The Shadow Lines* as mere ornaments nor are they totally dominated by the male characters of the novel. Ghosh elevates them to the position of 'beings'. However, this article aims to explicate how Tha'mma and Ila are 'lesser' beings in regard to the unnamed narrator of the novel. In this context, Madan M. Sarma's comment is noteworthy, “However one has to be slightly cautious about using the term 'character' in respect of this novel, where the focus is on selected number of events and situations in the lives of the first person narrator and the persons closer to or acquainted with him”(2011, p.185).

So, the narrator works as the lens through which we get to see the narrative and also the characters and as such both Tha'mma and Ila are stereotyped because they lack the magical talisman or imagination power that the narrator has. Tha'mma is described as a 'typical' Indian grandmother, full of love and care. From the narrative style readers also get the sense that the narrator has genuine love for his grandmother. Tha'mma spent her childhood and youth in Dhaka, which in 1971 became the capital of the newly found nation Bangladesh. She is anti-colonial in her attitude and she has a boisterous and 'old fashioned' notion about freedom. She says, she “would have done anything to be free” (Ghosh, 1988, p. 39). Therefore, she fails to understand “how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (Ghosh, 1988 p. 152). Moreover, she also fails to understand Ila's (Tha'mma's sister's granddaughter) notion of freedom. Whereas, Tha'mma's notion of freedom depends on rootedness, Ila's freedom is based on being rootless. Ila, who is a 'citizen of the world' wants to be “free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (Ghosh, 1988, p. 89). Therefore, both Tha'mma and Ila have problematic notion about home and freedom. This unhomeliness is the insidious reality that haunts both Tha'mma and Ila. Tha'mma's notion of home is constructed whereas Ila's is uncared for. However, the narrator and Tridib do not suffer from any such problem. Both of them have “talisman” of imagination. The narrator is amused by his grandmother's notion of nationalism and he gives Ila a reality check that she can never be free, free from her native culture, free from the narrator. So, it is quite clear that even though, Ghosh has given his female characters prominence and 'being', it is however, the male characters who have 'perfect knowledge' about home, Space and freedom. When Tha'mma comes to Dhaka to rescue her Jethamoshai, she cannot locate Dhaka as she knew it and she asks “Where is Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka” (Gosh, 1988, p. 193). At this juncture, Tridib, who is almost as

omniscient as the narrator himself, gives Tha'mma the pivotal information "But you are a foreigner now" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 195). This comment of Tridib showcases that he has a better understanding of nationality and freedom than the idealist and patriot Tha'mma. Shawkat Hussain points out in his essay "Post colonial Angst in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*", "perhaps the greatest irony of independence of India for characters like Tha'mma is that while it gave them freedom and a new nation- state, the partition took away their "homes" and the dialects that gave them their special identity" (1999, p.127). While Tha'mma herself is bewildered by her diasporic identity, ironically Tridib has a better understanding of Tha'mma's current identity. So, in the post colonial and patriarchal setting of the novel men need to form or help form the identity of the female diasporic characters. On the other hand, Ila's condition and dilemmas are different from those of Tha'mma. The globe-trotting Ila is essentially devoid of a 'real' idea of home. She observes while playing with the narrator, "we can choose to build a house wherever we like" (Ghosh, 1988, p.70). Ila is portrayed as rootless and she is careless about being rootless. In this context Tridib's remark about Ila is noteworthy, he says, "although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 21). However, Ila does not only stand in sharp contrast to Tha'mma but also to the narrator and Tridib. Her lack of imagination is brought into focus when the narrator comments that, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 20). Even though Ila has physically been to many places but she lacks the "eyes" to really see those places. This lack of imagination and curiosity automatically puts Ila in an intellectually inferior position to the narrator. The narrator seems to have a better understanding of freedom than Ila. Ila is portrayed as a 'free and modern' woman and she wants to break free from every bondage of culture, nationalism and relations, the narrator reminds her, "You can never be free of me, I(narrator) shouted through the open window. If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because I am within you... Just as you are within me" (Ghosh, 1988, p.89). It seems that Ghosh is indicating to the readers that 'only' the narrator has a real understanding of freedom, not Ila. Ila does not belong anywhere even though she is a globe trotter.

While Ila's belonging to a specific root is in question, Tha'mma is deeply rooted in her 'constructed' nationality. Both Tha'mma and Ila have misconceptions about their identities. Tha'mma rejects that she is a 'refugee' on the basis that she came to Calcutta before partition. Ila is not a 'refugee' as she is a global citizen. Nevertheless, both fail to understand that "identity as 'production' which is never complete" (Hall, 1994, p. 392). But this identity crisis is not transmitted to the narrator. The narrator seems to possess a balanced idea about identity and rootedness. To summarize, Tha'mma and Ila's character it can be said that they represent opposite poles of the diasporic spectrum. Tha'mma represents blind nationalism; on the other hand Ila represents indifference towards the need of root. Linking these two characters Ghosh gives the readers

the male narrator, who questions nationalism, maps, margins- the shadow lines and figures out the true meaning of nation and identity, a meaning that is beyond the grasp of Tha'mma and Ila.

V

In conclusion, it can be said that this article not only shows the subaltern position of women in colonial and post colonial setting but also charts how treatment of female characters went through an evolution in different colonial and post colonial settings. Whereas, in the *Heart of Darkness* female characters get lost in the narrative structure and they can easily be discarded, in *Things Fall Apart* female characters cannot be separated from the narrative structure without hampering the plot construction of the novel and finally, in *The Shadow Lines* female characters are integral and inseparable part of the narrative of the novel. Though, in none of the settings women are treated as equal to men but a definite change in the position of women is seen. So, this article shows how women are doubly subaltern in colonial and post colonial setting but it also shows how slowly but surely position of women in the aforementioned narratives have changed, changed for better.

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