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PORTRAYING FEMALE CHARACTERS IN SELECTED NOVELS OF E. M. FORSTER'S "A  
PASSAGE TO INDIA", AMA ATA AIDOO'S "OUR SISTER KILLJOY" and JOSEPH  
CONRAD'S "HEART OF DARKNESS"

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**ABSTRACT**

Modern novelists and critics have done tremendous works in portraying female characters in their literary production. For example, Okediji (1981) in *Atoto Arere* portrays female characters as mother, wife, sister, prostitute, harsh and malicious, who always keep malice against others. The role of women is another theme of the novel, and Forster presents many separate points of view. Mr. Turton sees women as a bother and thinks ruling India would be a much cleaner exercise without any females present. While Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* focuses on Marlow's passage into the interior of Africa as he searches for the mysterious Kurtz, there are several female characters that play supporting roles. This paper examines three novels namely *A Passage To India*, *Our Sister Killjoy*, and *Heart of Darkness* evaluates how female characters in the novels are portrayed.

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In addition to race, gender also divides colonial society. British colonial society in India, made up as it is of administrators and their wives, is not exactly English society in miniature – it tends to aggravate whatever is most conservative and traditional about English culture, including a traditional attitude toward women as the much weaker sex. Despite its criticism of the British colonial attitude toward women, *A Passage to India* seems to harbor sexist attitudes. In fact, some critics have argued that female characters such as Adela and Aziz's wife are reduced to pawns who are exchanged between men to establish relationships between men, excluding the possibility of equal relationships between men and women.

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* starts with the white women who come from outside to observe the colonial society. In the beginning of the novel, Adela [Miss Quested] tells Mrs Moore that "you and I keep on attending to trifles instead of what's important; we are what the people here call 'new'" (89). As an "ignorant traveler," she believes Aziz is "true" India without any consideration:

As for Miss Quested, she accepted everything Aziz said as true verbally.  
In her ignorance, she regarded him as "India," and never surmised that

his outlook was limited and his method inaccurate, and that no one is India. (65)

However, her sweet dream as a colonizing subject cannot continue when she realizes the difference between the passive woman observer and the white male colonialists who consolidate benefits from the colony. Ronny, Miss Quested's fiancé and a colonial officer says that his purpose in India is "to do justice and keep the peace" (45), whereas Adela just "want[s] to see the real India" (21). These statements reveal the different positions of British men and women in colonial India.

The more white women try to identify their dreams with those of men, the more they find the gap between the two sexes. Finally Adela recognizes that she cannot be a male subject in the colony. Ronny complains to Adela and Mrs Moore that he does not feel good "to see an English girl leR smoking with two Indians" (71). The reader can find their different positions in the dialogue between Ronny and Adela:

"Have you been to them?"

"No, but I know all about them, naturally . . ."

"I won't have you messing about with Indians anymore! If you want to go to the Marabar Caves, you'll go under British auspices." (76)

At the end of *A Passage to India*, Adela completely disappears from the scene, and then Aziz and Fielding conclude the novel. Nostromo also ends with Mrs Gould who offers nothing but a feeble murmuring: "In the indistinct voice of an unlucky sleeper, lying passive in the grip of a merciless nightmare, she stammered out aimlessly the word: 'material interest'" (432). Her passivity is maximized when she refuses Nostromo's offer to tell her where the silver is and answers: "No, Capataz, no one misses it now. Let it be lost forever" (460). In this way, it is hard to take these women's insight as successful because it cannot effect any change or movement in the public sphere.

[The women] disliked [Fielding]. He took no notice of them, and this, which would have passed without comment in feminist England, did him harm in a community where the male is expected to be lively and helpful. (1.6.3)

This passage explains Fielding's experience with British India's much more conservative attitude toward women than that in England. In British India, women are viewed as weak, requiring the protection of men.

"She was my wife. You are the first Englishman she has ever come before. Now put her photograph away." (1.11.9)

This passage is often cited in support of the view that women are just pawns to be exchanged between men. Significantly, Aziz's wife is dead, not a live, breathing person – she is a thing, basically reduced to a photograph. Aziz shows her picture to Fielding as a way to establish their friendship; her picture is, in effect, a Facebook friend invitation.

Adela] was particularly vexed now because she was both in India and engaged to be married, which double event should have made every instant sublime. (2.14.2)

Adela's "attack" in the caves brings up the interesting question of what actually happened in there. This passage supports the view that her attack was a hallucination on her part. Why? Her encounter with India, this wonderful exotic place that's supposed to be utterly exciting, is closely linked to her thoughts about love and marriage, so closely as to be inseparable. She *wants* "sublime" experience, and because the actual fact of her engagement is boring, she needs to find sublime experiences – make them up, if necessary. This does bring up the question of whether the novel is portraying Adela as just another weak female, prone to hysterical flights of fancy.

"After all, it's our women who make everything more difficult out here," was his inmost thought [...] (2.24.23)

Turton airs a common cliché at the time that women made governing India difficult for the British. As objects of erotic temptation for Indians, white women cause conflicts, such as Adela's trial.

Exactly, and remember it afterwards, you men. You're weak, weak, weak. Why, they ought to crawl from here to the caves on their hands and knees whenever an Englishwoman's in sight, they oughtn't

to be spoken to, they ought to be spat at, they ought to be ground into the dust, we've been far too kind with our Bridge Parties and the rest." (2.24.41)

Mrs. Turton reveals here a much nastier racism than her husband's. "Ground into the dust"? That sounds like genocide. Mrs. Turton's comment also happens to be a reference to the British reaction to the supposed attack on a white missionary woman in 1919, which led to the infamous Amritsar massacre, where hundreds of innocent Indians were killed. (See "Setting" for more on the Amritsar massacre.)

*Our Sister Killjoy* is a novel about a Ghanaian student, Sissie. She is awarded a scholarship to travel to Europe -- a big deal in those times (the late 1960s). The Europeans are eager to impress (or "make good again") and wine and dine her as soon as they know she is going: as soon as the embassy found out she was the chosen one "they had come to the campus looking for her in a black Mercedes-Benz". The actions and words of others suggest: "that, somehow, going to Europe was altogether more like a dress rehearsal for a journey to paradise". Sissie isn't that easily convinced. She recognizes the opportunity, but doesn't overestimate it.

*Our Sister Killjoy* is presented in four sections. The first, short one is titled: "Into a Bad Dream", as Sissie travels to Germany. Sissie is no naïve innocent. She is comfortable in her own skin, and only gradually over the course of her travels does it dawn on her that she is often the only black person in a given place. But she is not insecure about questions of race, and she is fairly adventurous, in contrast to most of the other foreigners she is grouped together with for her stay in Germany.

The protagonist, Sissie, is an educated African woman who occupies a position between two cultures (Western and African) and through her journey to Europe, Aidoo rewrites the European historical and fictional record. By reversing the colonial travel narrative, Aidoo situates her narrator in a privileged position where she observes the West and creates a counter-discourse about it based on the knowledge that she generates from her observation. In so doing, Aidoo demonstrates Edward Said's principle of resistance where one has "to know the Orient outside the discourse of Orientalism and to represent and present this knowledge to the Orientalists- to write back to them".

To conclude, in *Our Sister Killjoy*, Ama Ata Aidoo domesticates the novel as a strategy for decolonization by re-presenting the "story of Africa"; employing a narrative style and engaging with subject matter that asserts the difference of Africa and Africans from Europeans. She subverts the discourse of Orientalism, which "constructs and dominates Orientals in the process of knowing them". Through the character of Sissie, Aidoo challenges Western metaphysics and epistemology on which colonization and its notions of Otherness are grounded. She reverses the colonial travel narrative and criticizes colonization and its lasting impacts on Africa, the "artificiality" of life and the "coldness" of existence in the West, and Western advancement and technology. Her narrative style does not conform to the standards of the traditional novel in that she mixes genres throughout the course of her work as a way of defying western conventions of storytelling. As Helen Tiffin argues, "decolonization is a process, not arrival; it involves an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their postcolonial dismantling". Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, as a dismantling of the colonial tale, serves as a strategy for decolonization both in terms of style and subject matter.

The women characters in the novel *Heart of Darkness* hardly appear to be rounded out characters. They appear one-dimensional: Kurtz's Intended is a vision of idealized womanhood, of beauty and love, while his African mistress appears to be little more than the personification of the wildness, the savagery of nature. This can also be viewed as a kind of misogyny, making women appear as little more than abstractions.

However, women in this novel are not really viewed in such a negative light as has sometimes been supposed. Although women characters may be few and far between, and apparently cocooned, by and large, in their own world, they aren't weak or helpless. Kurtz's African mistress is an imposing, most impressive presence when she appears, and his Intended comes to dominate the scene at the end of the novel. We should remember, too, that it is a woman, Marlow's aunt, who precipitates him into his terrifying journey into the heart of darkness when she helps secure a job for him in the Congo. Even more important than this,

perhaps, is the fact that the qualities that are generally seen to attach to women in this novel are positive ones: love, loyalty, emotional nurture.

"It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be. It's 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."  
(1.28)

Marlow thinks that women are naïve and idealistic, believing in fantastic and utopian worlds that would never work in the reality he knows. Dummies. (Okay, but he's secretly totes jealous.)

There are not many women in *Heart of Darkness*, yet the few that appear in the text are striking. From the two women that Marlow first encounters in the Company's office to Kurtz's savage mistress to his ever faithful wife, the perception of women as steadfast symbols for men's actions is prevalent in the novella. In this way they are often depicted as having a dangerous edge and it seems certain that Marlow does not trust them.

The two knitting women are the first females introduced in the book. Despite their harmless outer appearance, there is something very ominous in the way that they are described: they knit black wool continuously, when the slender woman goes to greet Marlow she does not glance up at him until she is very close and her approach is depicted as confrontational, even the older woman who seemingly finds it difficult to move from her chair boldly glances at every person put before her with "unconcerned wisdom" (46), as if she knows each one in a moment. These two women leave quite an impression on Marlow who is a bit shaken by the experience. He describes how he later pictured the women as the guardians of the "door to Darkness" (46), which makes them seem to have a divine, goddess-like quality or at the very least to not be a part of the physical world. After all, they are guarding "Darkness" which is a very abstract concept, yet something that is a constant theme in the book and clearly a very real substance to Marlow even though he cannot quite describe it. This is consistent with Marlow's view of women, which is depicted in the statement above that he makes in a meeting with his aunt. He conveys his belief that women do not live in reality. Although this seems to be a slight, Marlow also brings across a sense of uneasy respect for women since they drive men to live up to their impossible expectations, which are apparently "too beautiful" to come to fruition.

The next woman encountered in the story is Kurtz's African mistress. Again we see the respect or dread that Marlow has for her. She is described as "savage", "wild eyed and magnificent" and a "barbarous superb woman". Marlow also perceives something "ominous and stately" about her actions, like the knitting women there is something about her that should be feared. She is very controlled in her actions and keeps up a consistent, yet mysterious attitude- she is otherworldly (again, consistent with Marlow's view of women as inhabitants of another nonexistent world). In correlation to her mien, she is twice compared to the wilderness, which "seemed to look at her...as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (106). In fact, she represents perfectly what it is in women that Marlow seems to fear the most: their control over men. According to the Russian trader, she created many problems for Kurtz and apparently had a good deal of sway over his actions. By comparing her so directly with the wilderness, she also becomes a symbol of Africa and of its effects on Kurtz's mind. She beckons to him from the shoreline, like the savageness, the darkness in Kurtz's soul beckons him back to the jungle, even at the risk of his own wellbeing. He tries desperately to answer the call to oblivion, literally dragging himself through the mud to return to this way of life. Marlow is the only one that stands in his way.

In the world of *Heart of Darkness*, women are second-class citizens at best. They don't know what goes on out on the water or in the jungle, and for Marlow and most of the other men of the novel, they don't need to know--telling women the truth would wreck their innocence and politeness. Best that they stay naive and simple. Marlow says at one point:

'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.'

Later, he says:

'(T)he women...are out of it--should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse.'

Everything Marlow observes about women is through this lens of protectiveness and separation, to the point of being really patronizing. One of Marlow's biggest moments in the novel is keeping one of these precious women in the dark about the truth of the world--we'll get to that later.

Conrad in this novel does appear to belittle women to some extent, downplaying their capabilities and understanding. However, their emotional qualities are also extolled as an antidote to the darker side of human life and nature. Therefore, women have their own significance in the story, and even appear quite powerful.

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