



Colonizer's 'Fantasy' of the 'Other': 'Construction' of the Colonized in *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to unravel the role of fantasy in the construction of the 'Other' in colonial texts. Taking theoretical aid of some of the concepts given by Todorov, Tolkein, and Ursula Le K Guin, the paper tries to analyze the 'Other' and otherness of the colonized as observed in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* by situating it in the realm of fantasy. The representation of the 'savage' native along with the equally 'savage' geography of the colony underpins the overlap of devices employed in fantasy with those employed within the field of postcolonial critique. The concept of the 'Other' is used to cement the binaries of known and unknown, desirable and undesirable, and is viciously employed by the Western discourse to create a lopsided knowledge of the unprivileged subject. This lopsided discourse then becomes a site of investigation for the critics and scholars. Although Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* has been explored from postcolonial perspective numerous times but this paper attempts to enquire into the construction of the 'Other' by juxtaposing this with the mechanisations employed in the genre of fantasy.

Keywords: Fantasy, Other, Construct, Empire, Colonized

Literature of the fantastic is concerned to describe desire in its excessive forms as well as in its various transformations or perversions.

(Todorov 138)

Such stories [fairy tales] [...] open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe.

(Tolkein 128-9)

Introduction

The genre of fantasy uses an imaginative lens to look at the world beyond a reader's vision but at the same time offers a vantage point to take a deeper look into the ploy used to fabricate a given fantasy land. The ploy which creates marvellous creatures and incredible landscapes also infuses literature with certain veiled discourses. The veil can be anything ranging from moral, religious, regional, national, racial, or continental stereotypes. The stereotype of fantasy in medieval and pre-colonial times is found to be non-racial albeit having its own signposts to distinguish the 'Other' from the rest. However, the subsequent advent into the age of reason and enlightenment created new signposts leaning towards 'racial other' and 'radical other'. Therefore, we can say that fantastical stereotypes of the contemporary world have created their own forms of 'Others' that seem to resonate with the colonial 'Others' that emerged out of Europe's civilizing mission. We shall embark on the common aspects between the fantastical and colonial 'Others' beginning with an overview of fantasy as a unique field of literature while touching upon a few concepts that are intrinsic to it.

Fantasy is harnessed as a literary mode through which a writer indulges in a free play of imagination foregrounded in an enigmatic set up. The set-up is often a dwelling of fairies against dragons; princes and princesses against witches and monsters; distant figures against ghosts and deranged creatures in strange castles and dungeons; extra-terrestrial creatures against vicissitudes unimagined by our world, to name a few scenarios. The fairy lands, castles, spaceships and alien locations seem to be isolated from our own world and are believed to be a part of fantasy world where incredible, marvellous and terrific things happen. The happenings can either have a rational explanation in the end or what Todorov calls "uncanny: fantastic-uncanny" or they "may be characterized by the mere presence of the supernatural" (Todorov 47) categorizing this as the "fantastic-marvelous: marvelous" (Todorov 44). According to him, both uncanny and marvellous

are posited in the world of extraordinary/ supernatural which evokes certain hesitancy in the reader. The hesitancy occurs in the state of momentary belief in the ensuing fantastic events which obfuscate the line between real and imaginary. Todorov's concept of fantasy offers an insight into the quagmire of belief and disbelief that is generated through/in the fantasy literature.

It is true that fantasy works at a level where reality seems to be absent. But it only seems so, while actually these creatures, these locations and these stories might have a lot to speak about the purported absence of reality. The issue of reality in the imaginative world of fantasy was contested and thereby asserted by J.R.R. Tolkien in his famous essay, "On Fairy Stories" wherein he claims, "Fantasy is a rational not an irrational activity" (139) and therefore has its base in the real world. He defended the field of fantasy from the criticism of being an escapist literature only suited for children's nursery shelves, and vehemently established that all the fairy lands emerge from a matrix of reality. To quote Tolkien:

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator wishes in some way to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. . . The peculiar quality of the 'joy in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. (155)

The 'truth' here is veiled in an enchanted story which, according to Tolkien, reflects those elements of the primary world which are dejected, marginalized or are considered undesirable. These elements get a chance to actualize their desire of being accepted when they are given a position of power in the realm of the fantastic by the writer. For instance, the painter Niggle in "Leaf by Niggle" is disapproved of and is led onto an allegorical journey in Tolkien's short story. He and his painting are ultimately assimilated in the real world but in a

manner that is modified, yet meaningful. His working terms like ‘sub-creation’, ‘secondary world’, ‘inner consistency of reality’, all refer to a mode of literary manifestation which borrow from the real world and transport the elements as well as the reader into the fabricated world of fantasy. But at no point does he concede that this fabrication is baseless and alien. The same thought is extended by Rosemary Jackson who says:

Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different”. (4)

This ‘absolutely ‘other’ and ‘different’ is also what Botting refers to when he defines Gothic as a “writing of excess” and transgression” (Botting 1). All fantasy works – namely, Gothic, science fiction (SF), fantasy—are consciously or subconsciously engaged in performing one common task of spouting forth a known element shrouded in a peculiar otherness, making it an Other-- an Other that is a source of awe and terror simultaneously. To further clarify the term ‘Other’ we can borrow from Lacan’s concept which posits ‘other’ (with a small case ‘o’) as a split within an individual as contrasted to the ‘Other’ (with an uppercase ‘O’) subject which represents a radical alterity that does not identify with the ‘self’ of an individual in the sense that it is external to the ‘self’. The ‘Other’ with its inassimilable alterity, can also be broadly defined as “the state of being other or different”; or more aptly, as “the circumstance of “others” who are nominalised and distanced by hierarchical and stereotypical thinking” (Freeman 404). The alterity, projected as an aesthetic wilderness of an unknown, is the common feature in the subject ‘Other’ of fantasy which serves as a repository of everything that is at once a mystery and a temptation; an undesirable existence as well as a moral enquiry to be undertaken.

This subject-position of the 'Other' encompasses attributes and domains ranging from a pre-established stereotype of character(s) to an exotic landscape, from an extra-terrestrial event to the hyper-reality of cyberpunk, or a combination of one or more of such fantastical elements. The fact that these 'othered' elements are not just limited to fairies, dragons, and other-worldly alien creatures, but are also a terrific simulation of our very own species of human race, make the 'othering' an insidious manifestation on the part of the fabricator. This is the point where the question of intent arises; contesting whether the intent of the writer in constructing this 'Other' in the fantasy fiction is conscious or subconscious. While it points to the enquiries in the field of psychoanalysis through "textual unconscious" by Maud Ellmann, it also brings us to its intersection with the colonial discourse of creating the colonized 'Other'. Therefore, it is necessary to look deeper into the strategy that fantasy employs.

There is a pattern that underlines fantasy fiction which interestingly coincides with the mechanizations in colonial discourses. In a fashion similar to that of Western narratives of enlightenment, the writer of fantasy introduces the reader with object/s of desire and/or derision and skillfully marginalizes those elements which interfere with the desired order of social/cultural/political structure. Whether it is the terror evoking magnanimity of the *genie* in the *Arabian Nights*, or the beguiling wizards and magical world of Hogwarts there is a nebulous undercurrent of desire and derision. Therefore, realm of fantasy can be a veritable window for examining the marginalised or at times exoticised 'Other'.

The stereotypes employed in a work of fantasy when subverted, lead to an understanding of various forces that propel certain elements to the margins as will also be mirrored in the concerned colonial text. This connection between fantasy and colonial texts becomes explicitly interconnected if we look specifically at the Gothic in the field of fantastic. One might recall Beckford's *Vathek* that presents a blasphemous Caliph

through whom Oriental notions are forwarded, Wilkie Collins' mystery/detective novel *Moonstone* which weaves suspense around a diamond brought from India, and much of Rudyard Kipling's fiction in *Plain Tales from the Hills*. The Gothic veneering of a colonial ideology nudges towards a postcolonial perspective of fantasy fiction. The fact that the very thread of 'Othering' and thrusting aside the ones that are not 'Same', an approach that is indispensably intertwined with the working of the Empire, justifies such a shift of perspective.

It is pertinent here to note the forms of 'Other' that fantasy and later colonial discourse used in their narratives. Before the field of fantasy became a colonial adjunct, the 'Other' was only limited to the beliefs and superstitions of the medieval era. This 'Other' was imbued with the moral, religious and societal tensions of class, gender and religion, for example, the aristocrats fantasised a certain savage, wormy peasantry and the peasantry fantasised a stoic, brute aristocracy as seen in many Victorian texts. The clergy was the moral police who instilled a repulsive figure of a dissenter who was sure to receive retribution by the strikingly scary avatar of the divine. God in itself has been the bearer of the most fantasised figure of horror and awe, hence being a tool for creating a certain social and moral order and silently endorsing the terror capacity of the 'Other' in the metaphysical universe.

The medieval 'Other' who was an effigy of any deviation from the established normative order, was subtly replaced by the factual yet ideologically fleshed out 'Other' of the epistemic era that came with the age of Reason and Enlightenment. Therefore, the form of the 'Other' changed from that of a vengeful demonic apparition featuring in allegorical stories of Godly domain, from a hysterical woman, from a spiteful mendicant who was seen as the sole bearer of plague and death, to something new and something which came not from *within* the Empire, but from *without*. The 'Other' of the former category – the reified images of religious dissent, madness, and class phobia – remained as it is in the narratives of medieval

texts and subtly seeped into later Gothic and postcolonial works. This explains the return of Gothic texts to the medieval settings in one way or the other. However, the latter form of the 'Other' –that which came from outside the empire—is what fantasy in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century embarked upon with its colonial pen dipped in imperial ink. This is where the 'Other' took a form which was projected distant from the coloniser's own form (both geographically and anatomically) and which Edward Said has narrated in his seminal work *Orientalism*, besides many other.

With the imperial advent, cartography lent a Foucauldian power to the explorers who did not only discover new lands and people, but also invented them through an ingenious storytelling in which the characters were literally sketched with colonizer's unchallenged language. An encounter of the Empire with the native made them appropriate him as somebody who was not the 'same'. Said puts it succinctly, with respect to the oriental discourse, that it "created body of theory and practice" and ultimately "a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied-indeed, made truly productive-the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture" (Said 14). The Manichean construction of a dominant 'self' and an inferior 'Other' is an integral part of colonizer's discourse which many postcolonial writers such as Frantz Fanon, Gloria Anzaldua, Chinua Achebe to name a few, have attempted to highlight. But apart from being a colonial obsession and irrespective of the epoch it is placed in, fantasy occupies an intersectional position between the ideas and reality, between the desirable and radical, between different worlds of fictional utopias and their real geographical domains.

The specific content of fantasy fiction uses the aesthetic awe to exoticize the "Orient itself into a space of the marvellous" and "destabilizes the distinction between the real and the imaginary" (Dugan 118). The so-called 'Other' which

is fantasized and established as an abominable creature of unfathomable constitution (both physically and psychologically) in the course of a story, is not an inherent aberration but rather a construction. Ursula K Le Guin, a fantasy critic, asserts that imaginative attribute of this genre is “both intellectual and sensory” (*Language*). While she agrees that fantasy reverberates between reality and imagination, she also intuits that this fabrication of an imaginative landscape along with its fantastical paraphernalia might have bigger aims behind it. Then again in the introduction of *The Book of Fantasy*, Le Guin says “*fantasy* remains ambiguous; it stands between the false, the foolish, the delusory, the shallows of mind, and the mind’s deep connection with the real” (Introduction 10). Taking this ambiguous and also an ambivalent stance of fantasy, along with its underlying insidious motives already laid out, as an entry point, we can engage with the text at hand. As already established in the paper, the elements which constitute the narratives of fantasy are also echoed in colonial discourses. With the tools provided by this overlap, the paper analyses Joseph Conrad’s highly scrutinised novel *Heart of Darkness* through the lens of fantasy.

In “Beyond the Flaming Walls of the World: Fantasy, Alterity, and the Postnational Constellation”, Robert T. Tally says that fantasy “enables a figurative mapping of the (so-called) real world while using the (so-called) unreal or impossible as its means” (195). The literary cartography is cleverly used by the writer to employ two elements that are in parallel play in a work of fantasy – the real presence of a fantasised object and its conversion into something other-worldly and exotic. This approach is clearly reflected in Conrad’s novella which introduces the reader to a real place on the map (Africa), ‘hankered after’ the narrator-protagonist Charlie Marlow, a seaman. He says it was fascinating to look at the map of this place especially the river that swirled through it “resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land” (21) and it is this snake that

“charmed” Marlow. The character of the place is at once brought into the realm of something mystical with an imbedded eeriness, intuiting about something unfathomable but sinister. On his visit to the Company’s office to sign a trading contract before undertaking the journey, Marlow felt that “there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been led into some conspiracy. . .something not quite right” (24). Marlow’s advent into the ‘dark’ continent further builds on this image of a place that “instead of going to the centre of a continent” felt like going “to the centre of earth” (27) which reminds one of the fantastical ‘Middle-earth’ of the *Lord of the Rings* except that in Conrad’s novella the place is explicitly real.

Le Guin appends that the work of fantasy does not necessarily engage with the realm of impossible. But what they all have in common is that they ultimately create a landscape with its denizens who are not in the realm of possible. The make-believe is an integral part of fantasy literature which uses the element of tension to propel a chosen idea in a reader’s mind, but this very idea can also be used to fabricate the impossibility of the possible by creating an “utterly knowable in its negativised unknowability” (Khair 4). The depiction of the landscape in the Congo region by Marlow stands a witness to this set up. The journey down the Congo on the steamer elicits from Marlow statements like: “Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on earth and big trees were kings”; “. . . you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence.”; “And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” (54). The representation of Congo basin is woven with adjectives connotating the viciousness of the place with its stark alienness, which consequently creates a distancing in the readers of its plausible existence. This incomprehensibility is a prominent feature of fantasy fiction, which is highly palpable in not just

the chosen novella but also in another colonial text *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster with reference to Marabar Caves besides the whole landscape of Chandrapore and in another recent novel *The Thing About Thugs* by Tabish Khair wherein the British Captain Meadows is beguiled by his fantasy of India and its indigenous thug.

The extension of this unknowability of the landscape on to its inhabitants is imperative for it cements the construction of binaries between the self of the colonizer and the otherness of the colonized, profusely represented in all three texts mentioned immediately above. Otherness, writes Jameson, is “a dangerous category, one we are well off without” (Jameson 290). The infusion of the element of mystery and awe creates the means to distance the reader from any possibility of relating with the location or characters. This construed unknowability is manifested in the imagery of Congo region through its “black and incomprehensible frenzy” and the natives as a species that are presented synecdochically through “violently dilated nostrils”, “black shapes”, and “sunken eyes” (32).

Therefore, the text of fantasy becomes an ethnographic document, a representation of not only an imaginary space but also a real geographical location, painted purposively with the brush of colonial elements. Emmanuelle Sempère’s statement with respect to fantasy texts by Cazotte and Beckford finds an echo in the argument forwarded by the paper wherein he says, “there is a very clear correlation between oriental figures and the fantastic: because they are strange and mysterious for the reader, because they are often ambivalent and challenge the criteria of moral evaluation...” (qtd. in Dugan 115). A similar moral ambiguity is noticed in Marlow who is baffled at the external monstrosity of the native while forwarding their humanness through the double negative as if he cannot believe that they are not actually monsters, “We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was

unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman” (58).

In the case of fantasy, as conceived on the lines of a hegemonic articulation, it is necessary for the author to construct a stereotype to achieve the dual purpose of desire and derision. Bhabha points towards this ingenuity as “a knowledge that is arrested and fetishistic and circulates through colonial discourse as that limited form of Otherness that I have called the stereotype” (77-78). This stereotype, in the methodological construction of the West, is again based on the Manichean binary as already mentioned. This stereotype’s construction is more so evident in the mode of the fantasy, which transcends the boundary of awe and merges with the discourse of the Empire. Chinua Achebe in his scathing critique of Conrad’s text vouches for his adjectival ingenuity in depicting this dual purpose by stating:

Quite simply it is the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest. (Achebe 15)

The tension between the moral supremacy of the West over ‘the rest’ also aims at de-familiarising the association with the ‘Other’ by representing the fantastical as something that is problematic and unwarranted. It can be equated with “the ambiguity of ‘European’ selfhood in its relation to the non-European Other” which imbues the ‘Other’ with a capability of “evoking terror either in its over determined absence or by its sudden presence” (Khair 61). Induction of such a feeling of either presence or absence, through the work of fantasy, in the mind of the reader, was seen as threatening. Hence, the story of the terrifying ‘Other’ is supposed to be clandestine and not to be known fully. The representation of the menacing ‘Other’ is required to be made distant from the civilised people who are

“safely tucked into their stable and unthreatened social positions, (who) could feel secure enough to cultivate imaginary fears and fantasies” (Stevens 10). This explains why in romantic texts, the demonic figures belonged from some place away from civilised spaces of Europe. The terrifying character/s in Gothic and fantasy were from a foreign land, like Bertha Mason from Jamaica in *Jane Eyre*; Heathcliff from Carribean in *Wuthering Heights*; Dracula from Transylvania in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Conrad’s native was established as a savage, monstrous creature, an inhabitant of the faraway colony as if it “served to dehumanize the colonized, serving them up to the Western gaze” (Dugan 127-128). ‘They’ must stay on the margins, to be imagined in their utmost abomination, and only to be narrated in the same fashion. The precarity of an encounter with this otherness is noted by Chinua Achebe in his seminal essay, “Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to like a peep into the heart of darkness” (18). And hence, Marlow only approves of the labour of cannibals till they remain far away from the civilized world of the colonizer: “Fine fellows –cannibals –in their place” (55).

The relationship between the colonizer’s obligation to demarcate and often demonize the marginalized native and the terrific figure of ‘Other’ in fantasy is complex and yet unidirectional. The fear of the ‘Other’ with its negativized alterity haunts the discourse of enlightenment espoused by the West. This fear manifests itself through the dehumanized native whom Marlow documents as “nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation” (32), and in another place he refers to the speech of the cannibals as “amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language”. They are at once posited by Marlow as fantastic ‘monstrous’ ‘creatures’ who awestruck the reader with something dreadful yet faraway. The danger of the ‘Other’ is maintained in the text by showing how the darkness of evil emanated by the continent as well as the savage dark native engulfs the genius whiteness of Kurtz. His predicament is

a metaphor of the corruption that the ‘radical alterity’ of the ‘Other’ can cause by too much proximity. Unlike the other examples quoted in the paper, Conrad’s novella does not address the otherness from the fringes, rather travels to its putative centre, its heart. The insipid glory of the Thames river is contrasted with the ensnarled depravity, the diseased and deathly presence of the ‘criminal’ native bound with chain to the miracle vision of the Company’s chief accountant whose immaculate linen and ‘high starched collars’ commanded Marlow’s respect for his character. These and many more binaries are cemented by imbuing the reiterated negative qualities to the native and positive to the white man.

The fact that the element of fantasy in texts becomes a potential site of such binary constructions, these can at the same time act as a tool for subverting the problematic brackets created by the dominant discourse of the West. The realm of fantasy can become a window wherein the existence of the ‘Other’ is acknowledged, not in the other-worldly sense, but posited in the very world that is real. In this eclectic sense, what fantasy presupposes as seemingly improbable might be elucidated as something which exists in the realm of reality. Through this perspective, reader is presented with a world of possibilities where one can engage with the ‘otherness’ of the fantastical characters, and rather than obfuscating differences posed by the ‘Other’ as something unreal and faraway, these can be understood and assimilated within the real comprehensible world.

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