

Ecocritical Discourse and the Ambivalent Concepts of Colonialism and Marriage in Marilyn Heward Mills' *Cloth Girl*.

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Abstract- In both their literal and metaphorical perspectives, the terms, marriage and colonialism have often been used in literature to ascribe to situations of domination of individuals or territories by aggressors with masculinist powers and the surrender of victims with feminist helplessness. The female gender is somewhat equated to a geographical territory, just as much as the colonizer of a conquered territory can be likened to an abusive male partner in a marriage. In analysing Marilyn Heward Mills' novel, Cloth Girl, this paper discovers that environmental tropes are used symbolically and synonymously to describe the experience of subjugation in marriage and the novel reveals a consistent pattern of environmental images to sustain the engagement between the oppressor and the oppressed. vivid description of the vicissitudes of the natural environment that both marriage and colonialism were established at the pleasure of the superior partner and that privileges were not meant to be shared equitably.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has often been thought of essentially as an account of the activities, thoughts and values of human beings who live within the natural environment or are thought to interact with supernatural elements or beliefs. From the time of the Renaissance when pastorals were written on the countryside, to the time of Romanticism and Transcendentalism in the 18th and 19th centuries when nature poetry flourished in Europe and America, natural elements like the rivers, forests, birds, mountains, oceans and even planetary bodies had become not just an accessory but sometimes veritable themes in literature.

With the advent of ecocriticism, the relationship between the humans and the natural environment has become even more consciously and mutually

constitutive. Works of literature demonstrate in various ways how the humans coproduce the environment they live in, and while also the environmental conditions around them impact on their living. The physical environment is brought under subjection just as much as the environment acts on the human subject in the abstract manner. Timothy Clark illustrates this argument as he explains the meaning of the "wild", a term that stresses the resistance of human control, prediction and understanding of the natural elements and the dynamic of literary discourse to express human consciousness, thought and language, as thus:

Throughout history, places such as deserts or forests have been conceived as sites of identity crisis and metamorphosis, as the domains of the monstrous and terrifying, places of religious insights or of rites of passage, as in the biblical "wilderness." Such a space of disorientation may attract any number of meanings, hopes or anxieties. Some recuperations of the accultural is inevitable as soon as it enters human discourse. At issue here, however, is again the affirmation of wild nature as a scene of instruction or of the recovery or creation of a supposedly deeper, truer and more authentic identity, whether understood in spiritual political or often nationalist terms. (25)

The meaning of the wilderness for instance relies on two constructs – the sublime where the wilderness is seen as an act of creation, and the frontier representing the border between civilization and primitivism – both of which are created and manipulated in favour of powerful actors who use every opportunity to present their ideas as universal. In this regard, the environment works like an ideology. It could be argued further that the social stratification inherent in the idea of wilderness versus the developed world has remained intact despite the shifts in the meaning of the term over

time. Ramutsindela Naamo observes correctly that the environment has become a way of thinking about social relations and the relations between society and nature. He explains further that both in its untouched or manipulated form, the environment exemplifies a certain duality that reflects power relationship:

It (the environment) serves as an indicator of inequality in society and between regions of the world. The environment is a prism through which the futures of society and that of the planet are imagined, reorganized and protected, but also manipulated by powerful groups and nations in pursuit of their social, political and economic interests. (103)

The idea of social hierarchies of landscapes suggested here, whether within the same vicinity or across different regions, is analogous to such hegemonic exercises like colonialism, racism, class distinction or even gender differences. Most postcolonial literatures naturally engage in environmental disputes that are fraught with political, ethnic and religious overtones. Colonialism involves the extension of modern political and economic control by European powers over non-European societies thought to be uncivilized, primitive or wild. It also involves the excavation, plunder and destruction of the environment with the view to providing infrastructural development. The environment is consequently altered to reflect the social hierarchies of the rich/poor, the colonizer/colonized, the European/African and along many disparate identities endlessly. John and Jean Comaroff describe the hegemonic power of colonialism on the environment and social relations as such:

In general colonialism has long been associated, on all sides, with the spatial distance and racial difference, represented typically in the argot of center and periphery, enlightenment and barbarian; with overrule by the imperial state, usually through the offices of the local colonial bureaucracy; with the active presence of colonists, among them, missionaries and, in many places, expatriate settlers; and the imperatives of political economy. (70)

With an obviously hierarchical structure, the environment as fashioned and refashioned by humans assumes hegemonic tropes of class, gender or race in the world that is inherently driven by domination. Significantly, the natural environment is often viewed as feminine. The humans physically dominate, subjugate, colonize, or metaphorically marry or rape it the way they do a woman. The women are endorsed as somehow closer to nature than men, usually through their connection with motherhood and nurturing. Clark says “The association of women and the domestic sphere could be reaffirmed as their greater sense of respect for nature as a sort of home ecology being from the Greek’s science of the household” (118). Patriarchy and racism therefore complement each other as they deal with prejudices against perceived weaker categories in the same manner human beings subjugate the natural environment.

Marilyn Heward Mills’ historical novel, *Cloth Girl* [2006] is a story of racism and patriarchy set in colonial Ghana (Gold Coast). It is the account of the marriage and romantic lives of the colonialists and the colonized people of Africa told through spatial recreation of the vicissitudes of the environment. The polarity of the gender struggle in patriarchy is placed side by side with the binary structure of the colonialists agenda against the colonized in a complex web that is determined by the symmetry in the environment. In the novel, marriage is largely equated to colonialism even when both spouses are from the same race. There is also an inter-racial romantic relationship between Alan and Matilda with a craving to prove the idea of white male virility and the exploitation of the Black African female fecundity.

II. MARRIAGE

The trope of marriage in Heward Mills novel is used in both in its monogamous and polygamous varieties to exemplify the two cultures involved – European and African. Robert Bannerman, a Ghanaian with European blood marries two wives while Alan Turton, a British colonial administrator working in Accra marries only one. Although polygamy is a legitimate practice in Africa, the author presents Robert’s marriage to his second wife, Matilda as an unwholesome act, having been educated and brought up in the European way of life in England.

Robert Bannerman is a lawyer of the Ga tribe and partly European parentage. “His great-grandfather had been sired by a British merchant and a local girl and had been sent to school in England” (Heward Mills 14). Robert proudly flaunts his law degree obtained from England and he runs a successful law practice in Accra. He is counted among the black elites destined to take over leadership from the colonial masters after the independence of Gold Coast. Described as a “pillar of society (and) respected by many”, Robert is married to his first wife, Julie whose arrogant and condescending attitude towards domestic staff exemplifies the European side of the Robert’s life. Matilda however comes into his life as an object of beauty and pristine attraction which Robert cannot resist, just the same way the European colonialists were attracted to the so called primitive continent of Africa. It was love at first sight as Robert cites Matilda who runs an errand for her uncle, Saint John:

He had turned to go back into the house when he noticed a girl whom he did not recognise in the courtyard below. He was transfixed. He did not want to stop looking at her, and for a while took no notice of his wife, Julie, who had appeared beside him and was walking to him. Reluctantly, he turned his head towards Julie, allowing his eyes to linger on the girl as long as he could. He looked at his wife fleetingly, long enough to recognise the contempt in her face, and then turned back to look at the girl again. Julie stood and started with her husband for a few moments. Then she took the unfinished cup of tea from his hand and stormed into the house. (Heward Mills:9)

This passage demonstrates the ambivalence of Robert, a half-hearted lover caught in the contradiction of class and tradition. He turns his head “reluctantly towards Julie”, looks at his wife fleetingly” but allows “his eyes to linger on the girl as long as he could.” He decides to marry Matilda as a second wife according to African tradition, but strangely, does not bring her home to his house which is symbolically named, “Downing House,” to parody the British imperial seat of power. Matilda as a wife continues to live at her parents’ communal house and shuttles regularly to Robert’s house to prepare his meals like a house maid. While Julie’s marriage to Robert is contracted under strict conditions by her first African lawyer father

with the promise to shun polygamy, that of Matilda was arranged with the consent of her subservient uncle, Saint John and her mother, Ama who are anxious to please a condescending suitor from a superior social class. Matilda is insulted by Julie at their first encounter as co-wives of a husband whom Julie disparages as possessing a “disgusting animal lust” that defies the civilized breeding. Matilda’s response only proves the helplessness of the colonized African woman who is doubly tormented by the forces of patriarchy:

Matilda sat immobilized. She had never been so insulted in her entire life, and by someone who was not entitled to insult her, someone who wasn’t a relative, an uncle or an aunt or her mother. Had she met this woman on the street and been spoken to like this, she would have made some attempt to retaliate, to speak her mind, but this was the first wife, a woman she was duty-bound to respect. That the first wife did not like her was unsurprising, although she knew multiple wives could live in harmony and develop sisterly relationships. There was something frightening about this woman, an incredible coldness from within that convinced Matilda she could be dangerous to her happiness. (100)

Arising from the description above, Heward Mills captures the lingering dichotomy between the first wife, Julie, and the second wife, Matilda with a persistent temperature of the environment they inhabit. Julie, the elitist first wife exemplifies the first heritage of the colonial masters and is associated with a combination of coldness, slyness and snobbishness of the colonial European class, while Matilda the primitive, youthful second wife represents the forcibly colonized territories of Africa and is associated with persistent heat, ebullience and lack of serenity that surrounds her habitation. This is how the author describes the Lamptey’s house where Matilda lives with her parents on the very day her traditional marriage takes place:

It was a sunny Saturday, and at Saint John’s house, the hot air was thick with anticipation. Uncle Saint John and Matilda’s parents, aunts and sisters and female cousins were all scrubbed and starched ready to welcome Lawyer’s family to their home

for the traditional engagement ceremony. Outside, the gutter bubbled in the heat, releasing a nauseating smell which wafted into the courtyard with varying intensity. (107)

In contrast to the harsh environment, Julie lives in the ambience of serenity and comfort reminiscent of the European environment of which she and her husband have distant ancestry.

The room was spacious, dominated in one half by a heavy four-poster bed with a bedside table on either side of it. On the far wall near the bed were a dressing table and a chair with a cushioned seat. Several dusty pots and bottles were carefully arranged in descending order of height, with the tallest at the back *eau de cologne* and Yardley lavender water, Julie's favourite scents, which she kept in the boxes. There was a small sofa with a low table on which there was a neat pile of magazines fading copies of *Women and Home*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Ideal Home* which Julie had brought back from England with her, and which no one was allowed to touch. (72)

It is significant that in spite of the comfort of Julie's room, both the "pots and bottles" of perfumes were gathering dusts and her magazines on good womanhood and home management fading away in a pile on a low table. This is indicative of the collapse of the European family values occasioned by the decision of Robert to take a second wife. Robert is unable to either pull out of her first marriage or resist the charm and beauty of Matilda. He marries her but lacks the courage to bring her home at Downing house, a situation which leads Audrey to regard Matilda as a concubine. The author, however suggests through her description of the weather that Robert's polygamy could have been more successful if his two wives were living together. During one of her numerous visits at her husband's house to check on her children and cook for Robert, Heward mills demonstrates how the natural elements manifested in the harshness of Lamptey's house contrast with the serenity of Downing houses to produce a more ideal atmosphere:

Late that afternoon, Matilda walked to Downing House with the baby bound tightly to her back. The sun seemed to have paused in its descent and hung

on the horizon like a dim orange lantern, too far for its warmth to feel powerful, but close enough to light the darkening sky. Her leisurely pace disguised the drone of awakened dreams that swarm around her head. Absentmindedly she smiled and waved at people who greeted her. (226)

But unlike the temperate weather conditions described above, both the marriage of Robert to two wives and the romantic relationship between Alan and Matilda in spite of his marriage to Audrey are a sort of ambivalent encounters like the experience of colonialism. Robert loves and cherishes Julie's sophistication as his first wife, but he is infatuated with the warmth, industry and cooking skills of Matilda as his second wife. He marries two wives but lives with one and is not sensitive to the feelings of his second wife. Apart from such half-hearted approach to polygamy he displays, Robert's behaviour also exemplifies the prejudice of Ghana's colonial experience in which white colonial masters lived in better residential houses reserved for them while the black colleagues in the civil service lived in separate quarters. This contradiction is brought to the fore by Kofi, who challenges Alan's assertion about the white colonial officers who show open discrimination against the black elites in service of Ghana:

Then why do you and your colleagues live away from us, with your separate white-only clubs? And when you have children, why do you ship them off to be schooled like all the other Europeans? What contamination are you trying to avoid? (274)

The questioning of the logic of racial segregation in the colonial experience of Ghana equates to the rejection in postcolonial criticism of the universalist signification claimed by the White, Eurocentric norms and practices over the so-called black primitive cultures. The colonial administrators who wilfully undermine or segregate against the indigenous black elites are here likened to Robert's behaviour. He chooses to be a polygamist but deliberately neglects to treat his two wives with the same level of respect. Heward Mills' novel also tells the story of a childless white couple, Alan and Audrey Turton, whose marriage is stimulated principally by the prospect of an exotic adventure and service in colonial Ghana away from the boredom of England. After their

marriage Alan leaves for Ghana first and Audrey joins him six months afterwards. Audrey's anxiety about Africa is expressed in terms of her observation of the loathsome environment of the English winter: "She opened her mouth wide to fill it with the tastes of the country she was leaving – the muddy river, black smoke from factories close by burning rubber and coal, the cigarette unsmoked in her hand, fresh fish – and her stomach heaved" (38). This picture contrasts with her first view of Africa when she arrives at the harbour at Accra:

On the distant seashore stood a small gathering and the gangly coconut trees, which Swayed majestically, gripping the dirty sand with their meagre-looking root mounds. The trees appear defiant in the faces of the infringing waves, yet all along the beach, marking the site of the prior glory, lay hollowed relics that had eventually succumbed to the ocean. (40)

Audrey's ambivalent view of Africa is symptomatic of the colonialist impression of an oxymoronic paradise. She sees the towering "gangly coconuts" swaying in majesty as a sign of beauty and the natural endowments of the colony, but also notices the dirty environments as well as the "relics" of the past, indicating the glorious history of ancient kingdoms of Africa, being swept away into oblivion. So by the time Audrey settles down in her matrimonial home at Accra she develops a love-hate relationship with the colony. She embraces the excessive heat in Accra with stoic equanimity, having learnt from the *Gold Coast Handbook Guide* that a European in Africa should "cultivate an impassive and philosophic temperament, as irritability, a very frequent product of the climate, makes a man uncomfortable and has undoubtedly a bad influence on general health" (38). Audrey seems to love Ghana and its serene environment but easily feels irritated by the natives, just the same way her husband, Alan, is caught between the aridity of their marriage and the fecundity of his illicit love with someone else's wife. This ambivalent situation is conveyed by the author through the description of Audrey's and Alan's house and the surrounding areas inhabited by the Europeans:

Matilda leaned to look out of the window with unrestrained admiration. The grass was startlingly

green and together with the many flowering shrubs and trees brilliant orange birds of paradise, glossy pink hibiscuses, yellow frangipanis, flame coloured flamboyants, and white jasmines looked like an exquisite picture. She had never seen anywhere so beautiful, so thriving, or so immaculate, for that matter. There were maybe seven or eight men, all in identical brown clothes, tending this Eden, with large sweat patches on their shirts. Most of them wore straw hats to protect their heads from the midday sun, and those close to the driveway stood up as the car approached and tried in vain to wipe streaming sweat at their faces before taking off their hats in greeting. (245)

The invocation of the landscapes here demonstrates a wide variety of contradictory symbols; the serenity of the environment versus the harsh tropical weather; the delicate romance of a European couple versus the virility of the white-black love relationship and the colonialist's love for the African landscapes versus their dislike for the African people. In depicting both the polygamous and monogamous marriage relationships in the novel, the author accordingly engages two women on either side, with one being the privileged and the other, the underprivileged. There is no doubt that these social hierarchies have a hegemonic meaning which are provided through the description of the environment.

The novel ends with the privileged White Colonial Administrator, Alan having a child out of wedlock with Robert's second wife, Matilda. The baby girl is given two names – Violet and Ama which are names of her white paternal grandmother and black maternal grandmother respectively. Alan proposes to take Matilda along with him when he is posted back to England but she refuses having carefully considered the ambivalence of escaping from one harsh condition of rowdiness in Africa into another one of loneliness. "She found it impossible to imagine a sadder existence than living in a house all by herself...there were more people who needed her more than anyone else in the world" (369). These two constructs are created and manipulated by the forces of patriarchy and colonial subjugation.

III. COLONIALISM

The theme of colonialism is deployed in *Cloth Girl* by the skilful representation of the “wild” of both cross-continental and intra-city paradigms. Africa is depicted here as a wilderness and continent of savages that is ravaged by poverty, ignorance, diseases and wild animals, for which the Europeans had come on a civilizing mission. In a travel guide manual distributed to European visitors coming to Africa, the continent is described as the “white-man’s grave,” while Alan’s fellow cadets refer to Ghana as “Gold Coast” (39). This oxymoron is essential in explaining the love-hate attitude of the White colonial masters to Ghana. But determined to make the best adventure out of her stay with her husband in Ghana, Audrey endures the excessive heat, plants flowers around their house for aesthetics as she also encounters the ambivalence of living in the Ghanaian weather with European environmental consciousness:

The summer months dragged Audrey towards winter. Though she could identify little distinction here between hot and cold, rain and dry, she still thought about time in terms of the seasons back in England. Like the climatic changes at home, things that she had taken for granted growing up had gradually gathered disproportionate relevance – than rain, the greenness, the long summer evenings and the short winter days, the cool, the cold, the wet, crumpets and tea, the smells of England-her heart ached with longing for the sheer familiarity of it all. (159)

Audrey’s recall of the sights and sounds of England here is more than just the expression of nostalgia and homesickness. It is a deliberate reconstruction of the controlled and refined countryside of England which nurtures a great civilization, as opposed the colonized Ghanaian society where most people live in wild and uncontrolled environment. This is one of the familiar scenes she captures about the environment in Accra, which Audrey describes as a cesspit not yet exposed to civilization.

Why was he at ease in this strangeness, this hovel that he had brought her to where children were urinating into exposed sewers, and women were openly feeding babies from flattened breasts,

where armies of flies, attracted by the filth and germs of the sink, hovered first on children’s scabs, then their urine, then their piles of food that they would eat? How could he be unperturbed and even enthusiastic about this cesspit that the civilization of the British Empire had obviously not reached? And how could she learn to feel the same way, with her mouth coated in microscopic particles of stench despite her efforts to protect herself from it, and with these dirty children bent on touching her white skin? (35)

The above passage and the one preceding highlight the dual structure of the environment of two countries involved in colonization – the colonizer and the colonized. While the celebration of the English landscapes, flora, fauna and weather easily feeds into the colonial narrative of a developed and superior culture, the primitive and dirty environment of the African city is captured with utmost disdain. The Western myth of a great Europe with wonderful landscapes therefore justifies the well orchestrated narrative of a poverty stricken African continent that needs to be delivered from the shackles of poverty.

Audrey is probably one of the most environmentally sensitive characters in the novel. Her initial dream about an ecological “paradise” in Africa is not fulfilled because of the excessive heat that makes her skin parched and dehydrated. She strenuously fights back by nursing a garden of flowers and trees around their house. Most of her flowers and shrubs, however, wither under very harsh temperatures, except the large trees which are fine, “tapping into the deep underground reserves that had not run dry” (187). As she plans her final return to England after her husband’s tour of duty, she is torn between the excessive sunshine of Africa and the lush greenness of Europe, a combination of which is impossible at a time. She however conceptualizes the greenness of the grass as the better of the two, which means Europe is superior to Africa even by natural endowments:

“A few weeks in wet England and heaven forbid, I might yearn for sunshine. I expect the grass is always greener on the other side”

“The grass is what?”

“Merely an expression, it means things always look better on the other side from where one is standing”

“What a strange thing to say. You English people love grass to much”

“Yes. And the neighbour’s grass is always greener and healthier looking than your own.”

What is even more intriguing about the idea of the wild is the fact that it has been created within the same city to accentuate the duality of the colonizer and the colonized. Heward Mills oscillates her limelight from the European quarters, its serene and beautiful lawns, its recreational clubs house, swimming pool and horse racing arena through the moderately uplifted environment of black elites of the calibre of Robert and his wife Julie, to the slum area where members of the downtrodden of Accra live. The author’s description of the clubhouse and its activities tells the story of segregation that arises from Africa’s colonial experience:

The club was by the sea on at free-lined avenue, conveniently close to the leafy district where the colonial administrators lived...The large compound boasted a lawn of carpet grass, drought resistant turf with large, tough blades that grew horizontally, creeping along. Even so, in the heavy shade of the making large trees—neems, flamboyants, mangoes and various palms there were sizeable bare patches of red soil, aerated by armies of large ants. The effect of the shade from all these mature trees was instantly noticeable; it felt cooler, smelled fresh, clean and altogether more agreeable....

Africans weren’t welcome, even as guests, which Alan thought was a shame. Audrey, however, couldn’t think of anything worse than having natives ogling at her while she sunbathed (83).

Given its class and racial representation in the above passage, the colonialist agenda is established in the landscapes of Accra. The political, social and economic overtones of colonialism are reflected in the design of the city environment and its infrastructure. The stereotypical association of the black race as inferior to the white is established right at the heart of the capital city of Ghana. The psyche of both the

colonial administrators and the Africans is being acted on to believe and consequently justify the colonial agenda of the Europeans over Africa.

CONCLUSION

The twin concepts of marriage and colonialism, the two major themes in Heward Mills’ novel, *Cloth Girl*, are treated as complementing each other. Indeed, marriage in this novel is likened to colonialism, hence the dynamics of patriarchy and racism are evoked by an avalanche of symbols from the description of the vicissitude of environmental changes. Similarly, colonialism is depicted as a marriage of convenience between Europe and Africa in which both polygamy and monogamy, whether practised by the whites or blacks are portrayed in the novel as exploitative to the women folk.

The novel celebrates the controlled green environment of Europe and the segregated European quarters of Accra as modes of life embodying some sort of white supremacist agenda, akin to the patriarchal energy that defines marriage in Africa. In contrast the novel also captures images of the wild as well as the excessive heat and congestion in the slums of Africa to exemplify the uncontrolled hellish conditions and the uncivilised and pristine characteristics that are resistant to the regenerative forces of Western civilization.

On the whole, the author has proved that it does not really matter the spatial distance between Europe and Africa, or the essentialist differences between the white and black races, or indeed, the gender difference between man and woman; there is a marriage of convenience between these mutually opposites paradigms. This interpretation is conveniently teased out from the novel’s generous invocation of the changing natural environment portraying the irreconcilable differences between the oppressor and the oppressed.

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