

THE MUTE WOMAN: ISSUES WITH FEMALE VOICE IN CONRAD'S *THE LAGOON*

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Conrad's women characters in his novellas and short stories have perplexed readers not because of their scarce appearances and even less description, but because of their tremendous influence over the male characters. Women figures in the Conradian narrative are living paradoxes. In *The Lagoon* (1897) which Conrad claims to be his best short story, Diamelen is such a powerful woman who has not spoken a single word and who does little than falling in love and dying, yet single handedly changed the course of two men's lives.

Arsat's is a story of reflection. He tries to reproduce in heavily punctuated sentences the accounts of his psychic adventure. And noticeably he fails to reproduce a single word which Diamelen spoke. Since it is less probable of Diamelen being a dumb woman considering the oeuvre of women's representation in Conrad, this essay is an attempt to see Arsat's linguistic failure through the lenses of Kristevian psychoanalysis. Hence part of my attempt will be to interpret the Arsat-Diamelen relationship as a mode of nonsignifiable semiosis where the yet-to-be-subject, Arsat is submerged in a *jouissance* of *Chora*, and that Arsat as a subject in progress falls onto a *narcissistic depression* after Diamelen's just after the *thetic* break—which altogether does not allow him to use language as a symbolic mode of communication vis a vis to reproduce words which Diamelen spoke to him.

Joseph Conrad's one of the remarkable strategies in narrativization is managing rooms for multiple perspectives within the narrative. An array of suppositions, ideologies, beliefs or idealisms actually interface and shifts to a point of contradiction—which farther pushes the reader to a non-position against the multiple perspectives of the characters. Along this line of "janiformism"—so popular with Conrad— he successfully cuts across the demarcating line between the powerful and the powerless, the patriarch and the slave. In spite of the recent concentration on issues of homosexuality and homosocial bonding in the Conradian adventure tales, disruptive female authority haunts still; negative portrayal of women is prevalent in *The Heart of Darkness* where women are conceived something of an outsider and even sexual antagonists as Marlow notoriously claims—"the women are out of it". Still women are undeletable part of all the action men are capable of; the female perspective-- hardly any perspective if not considered the male praxis they are responsible for – itself a paradox. The female beings are voiceless once male protagonists are out in the thick of action. *The Lagoon* (1897) is exemplary in this that Diamelen has not spoken a single word in the entire narrative and whose words can be interpreted as only an unfathomable sonority of brutal emotive force which is neither heard by any character nor by the reader the story.

The story of *The Lagoon* is largely a story of recollection based upon the past adventure of the protagonist's life. Very little actually happens before the White Man's eyes; for the the White man had only the eye-witness of Diamelen's death. The earlier parts of the narrative namely Arsat's falling in love, stealing his beloved from the royal people, Arsat's brother's suicidal defense of his elder brother and sister-in-law and finally their secluded life in the lagoon—all has been a recollection of painful memories. The passages he narrates are extremely short but muffles a keen intensity beneath it. The incipient loss of love makes him use dashed sentences. And ineffable emotion oozes out the heavily punctuated and hyphenated and dotted sentences which he relates to Tuan. This failures and fissures of language actually open up the way to a psychoanalytic reading of the submerged text and perhaps the answers to the questions of female voices there.

The recollection of Arsat's love opens with a nearly pastoral setting amidst flora and fauna surrounding both the lovers.

“...we spoke to one another though the scent of flowers, though the veil of leaves, through the blades of long grass that stood still before our lips; so great of our prudence, so faint was the murmur of our longing.”¹

Diamelen, therefore, is so close to *terra incognita* from the beginning and the words she spoke were epithets of nature and she exists as if by her own rights, and also dies by her own rights .

The main function of Diemelen in the story is that of a Logos; a transcendental

1.Thorpe, Michael. ‘*Modern Prose*’ : 65

signified which is both part of an embodiment in Nature and a proper function as a woman of flesh and blood in terrestrial life of a man. The lack of concrete vocabulary to address Diamelen and love brings analysis close to the semiotic of Julia Kristeva. Their language has a special character which evades every linguistic embodiment; it is irreducible to verbal translation. In fact, the first communication can be fairly assumed as pre-linguistic, non-spatial *chora*, something like the womb or receptacle of a mother according to Kristeva. *Chora* has no identity or unity since it precedes “evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality”; it is not even a sign as it is prior to the linguistic. The exchange between the two subjects as evident in the description is purely maternal drives. At any rate Arsat fails to separate the existence of Diamelen from that of nature. She represents to him no less an embodiment of nature than a *cathexis* of love. Thus “scent of flowers”, “veil of leaves”, “ blades of long grass” and “murmur of *our* longing” seem to be intertwined with one another in a way that almost precludes salient difference between various things and himself.

Theoretically *chora* is a state of being when subject has not yet realized the borders between itself(subject) and the other(object); everything in this semiotic state is a flux of amorphous heterogeneity. The child cannot differentiate himself from the world outside and he uses affects to realize the way he feels. The first language he uses is not the language of the symbolic; its function is to discharge drives and energies. “ Discrete quantities of energy ” says kristeva, “move through the body of the subject who is not constituted as such and, in the course of development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body... in this way, the drives, which are ‘energy’ charges as well as ‘psychical’ marks, articulate what we call ‘chora’: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated.”² In the descriptive passage of secret love both Diamelen and Arsat mellow and almost lose their definitive bodily contours and are one with the plenitude of nature. And we do not hear Diamelen nor Arsat because the subject in becoming cannot

decipher the language she (mother) uses. The verbal exchanges of love take on a poetic quality namely rhythm, intonation, rhyme etc., as Arsat opts out the idyllic metaphoric nature-love connects in popular romance literature. The signifying process of love by rupture between signifier and the referent is yet to occur in a later part of the story. Words of wooing here, for the time being, are no signs. But it must be kept in mind this process of subject in the embryo is also combined with a simultaneous process of a rupture which Kristeva termed as *thetic break*. And this break is initiated within a very short space of the narrative. On following his brother's confident note, Arsat does not delay to pronounce— “ Let it be soon, for I find no warmth in sunlight that does not shine upon her.”³

The child's immersion in *chora* does not last for long; once the child's awareness deepens, he begins to realize the verbal discharges actually have some equivalents outside himself and that he is different from the surroundings. He becomes aware of the difference between self(subject) and other(object). At this moment the child slowly prepares for the symbolic. But note that at this break the infant is not a 'subject'; he does not enter the signifying economy. The natural entities which at a point seemed amorphous, now comes to to be felt for Arsat differently. For he clearly feels that the sunlight which heats him up has *another* being to heat

2. McAfee, Noelle. '*Julia Kristeva*' : 18

3. Thorpe, Michael. '*Modern Prose*' : 65

Since at this crucial point a rupture occurs necessarily as the 'subject' feels a longing for an object with an implication of—“(L)et *the reunion* be soon”. Kristeva describes this act as constituting “ an *attribution*, which is to say, a positing of identity or difference”. This process of *thetic break* roughly collates with the Freudian Oedipal stage and the Lacanian mirror stage of development. The rupture initiated at this stage becomes more interesting, because it the fear of another powerful woman whose 'cunning' may turn the tables down. In the classic Freudian theory the disruption in the dyadic infant-mother relation is done in fear of the father. When the infant realizes the mother lacks a penis, he gives up himself to identifying with the father.. and his desire drifts onto another woman in future time. Freud calls this fear *castration anxiety* or the possibility of chopping off his organ by the father figure. But question may arise who forces this reunion? Does it result from the primary narcissism?

Now if look at the text we find that Inchi Midah appears to be a woman of imperious will and omnipotence, albeit very little being spoken of her. She may of a supreme religious order or a very strong monarchic connection—at any rate, in both ways she can sway public opinion. The king himself is frightened of her 'cunning'. As a woman Inchi Midah nearly possesses a father like threat to the protagonist. Her influence also reminds us of the horror in *The Heart of Darkness* when the mistress of Kurtz approaches the boat, the Harlequin only thinks of attempting to shoot her, though by no means sure of it. Here these figures are painted as devilish and savage; they are sexual antagonists to the male protagonists. Their appearances or hearing within the ear-shot produces castration complex in the male psyche. But here in *The Lagoon* it seems the protagonist's repugnance for Inchi Midah is due to the primordial rage felt against the mother for directing desire to the father. On another level of interpretation even in the pre-mirror stage, the subject tries to create borders between “I” and the other by jettisoning the other—this process of rejecting other is termed *abjection* by Kristeva. Note that Arsat's Affair begins under the supposed threat of Inche Midah. Therefore finding an object cathexis and the process of abjecting the *other*(Inchi Midah) is simultaneous. But since the 'other' is not an other—“I” is always the object of the other's desire—“I” ends up abjecting itself; but the 'other' haunts still.

To put in Kristeva's words—it is an "imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us". The infant who is not yet a subject per se, tries to keep taints of mother's body away in order to form a clean identity. Thus fear of Inchi Midah should not be treated as purely external category. It does remind Arsat the original conspiracy (read *Cunning* in the text) of the mother and the subsequent fear of castration. And literally corollary of all these categories compel Arsat to speed up the elopement and also propels to seek a place unknown to fear and death.

Arsat sets out with this tenuous self. His brother's assertion could be taken as proofs—"There is half a man in you now—the other half is in that woman...when you are a whole man again, you will come back with me here to shout defiance".⁴ He is feeling both repellent and seduced. Arsat knows that if he steals Diamelen from the midst of the Rajah's men, nothing but death awaits him. Here precisely the fear of death incarnates itself in the fear of what he tries to abject, namely Inche Midah and the hostile royal authority. But still he runs headlong to it. On the other hand, he cannot dispense with Diamelen either as he enjoys the *jouissance* of *chora*. The author narrates:

4. Thorpe, Michael. 'Modern Prose': 66

"Arsat's voice vibrated loudly in the profound peace. "I had her there! I had her! To get her I would have faced all mankind. But I had her--- and---". Even at the loss of the brother he stays indifferent—"What did I care who died? I wanted peace in my own heart."⁵

The plenitude does not last long. Diamelen dies. She dies before Arsat's stepping into the symbolic as a 'subject' who is able to demarcate clearly the signifier from the signified; the subject from the object. And just at this occasion a new phase begins—the melancholic depression. According to the prevailing model of depression developed by Kristeva, the lost object is not an object residing outside of it, but an object which is already within since this occurs after *theic* break. The subject does not feel ambivalent love and hatred towards the lost object; Kristeva says---"Persons thus affected do not consider themselves wronged but afflicted with a fundamental flaw, a congenital deficiency, their sorrow doesn't conceal the guilt or the sin felt because of having secretly plotted revenge on the ambivalent object... In such case, suicide is not a disguised act of war but a merging with sadness and, beyond it, with that impossible love, never reached, always elsewhere, such as the promises of nothingness, of death."⁶ So this is the *narcissistic depression*. Arsat towards the end pronounces—"I can see nothing". This is the effect of losing the *other* which is part of himself. Melancholia is a non-communicable grief. The melancholic engulfed in sadness; something which escapes social/symbolic realm. Hence Arsat replies to Tuan—"I shall not eat or sleep in this house, but I must first see my road. Now I can see nothing—see nothing!" Thus at the end Arsat looks

5. Thorpe, Michael. 'Modern Prose': 70

6. McAfee, Noelle. 'Julia Kristeva': 60

beyond into "the darkness of a world of illusions" to become one with sadness at the cost of his own life perhaps. Thus from the beginning of his adventure till the end Arsat has never successfully come out as a subjectivity per se; everything that occurs in this short span, occurs outside the signifying economy; something that does not require language. Which is why He fails to reproduce a single word that ever escapes from Diamelen's mouth. And finally it must then that the great extent of whatever he communicates to Tuan is form recollection, to be precise, requiring a form of *symbolic* communication, which is a *phenotext* but underneath lays the *genotext* containing the total psychic accounts of the subject in progress.

Works Cited:

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