

# White Colonial Women in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*

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## 1. Preface

My paper examines the role of white colonial women in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904). These works do not try to underestimate the colony pictured as "savage" and "primitive" but instead describe the inner conflict and deprivation of white colonialists. I interpret these novels as self-critical works of white male writers to find alternatives to the colonial experience. Therefore, it is important to see how these efforts are represented in the novels and whether these are successful. Interestingly, these novels endow the role of reflecting and criticizing to "white women." Miss Quested and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India*, and Mrs Gould in *Nostromo* take on the important role of the observer who comes from outside the colony and observes its pitfalls.

## 2. Why Are There No Women Colonialists?

Forster and Conrad write about the early twentieth-century British colony from the perspective of the white colonizers. Their main concern is not to change the native society but to examine the white society through the reality of the colony. Because they focus on deconstructing the idealized white society, they need a person who is a "white" man but at the same time not actually a white "man": i. e. a white *woman*.

The question, "Why do white women play the role of reflector in the colonial novels?" is related to the question, "Why are there no women colonialists?" While

native women in the colony have the double responsibility to resist patriarchic violence and the suppression of colonialism, white women in the colonies are neither British colonizing subjects nor colonized natives but remain on the margins of the colony.

Thus the position of white women is similar to that of white male authors who enjoyed the profits reaped by the colony but were obliged to criticize it in the early twentieth century. This explains why so many female characters appear and observe the colony in the British colonial novel at that time.

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 fianc 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 left 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 any more! If you want to go to the Marabar Caves, you'll go under British auspices." (76)

Ronny says he knew the Indians "naturally." The male subject who governs the colony has the language to explain "others." He insists that the white woman should be protected "under British [man's] auspices," which implies that English women have to be controlled (protected) by male power and cannot be subjects even in the colony.

Like Adela, Mrs Gould in *Nostromo*, is also excited when she accepts the proposal of Mr Gould and decides to move to the "new world." The novel consists of this "innocent" white woman's experiences: how she experiences the colony and what she realizes there. Through an unprejudiced white woman's view, Conrad criticizes the corrupted colonial situation and encourages the critical self-reflection of white society.

At first, entering white men's colonial society, Mrs Gould regards herself as a white male colonialist. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her famous book, *The Second Sex*, "Women always see herself through men" (45). Mrs Gould idealizes the colony as the object of enlightenment and praises its bright future as the following passage shows:

[S]he had laid her unmercenary hands, with an eagerness that made them tremble, upon the first silver ingot turned out still warm from the mould: and by her imaginative estimate of its power she endowed that lump of metal with a justificative conception, as though it were not a mere fact, but something far reaching and impalpable, like the true expression of an emotion or the emergence of a principle. (117)

Identifying herself with her husband Mr Gould, the administrator of San Tom silver mine, Mrs. Gould praises the power of silver. However, even if she shares in colonial profit, it is permitted to her only insofar she is an assistant of a white man. Mrs Gould always supports her husband from "behind."

Mrs Gould, accompanying her husband all over the province in the search for labour, had seen the land with a deeper glance than a trueborn Costaguana could have done. Mrs Gould had seen it all from the

beginning: the clearing of the wilderness, the making of the road, the cutting of new paths up the cliff face of San Tomé ... she had stood by her husband's side perfectly silent. (116-117)

Mrs Gould who had accompanied her husband and seen all the important matters "had stood by her husband's side perfectly silent" fulfilling the given role of her marriage life. Because the colony was men's public sphere, woman relates to the colony indirectly by man's permission.

Like Adela, whose dream of identifying herself with the colonizing male subject is discouraged, Mrs Gould realizes that her husband's dream cannot be hers anymore.

My husband wanted the railway ... All this brings nearer the sort of future we desire for the country, which has waited for it in sorrow long enough, God knows. But I suddenly saw an Indian boy ride out of a wood with the red flag of a surveying party in his hand, I felt something of a shock. The future means change—an utter change. And yet even here there are simple and picturesque things that one would like to preserve. (127)

Although Charles Gould brings the rail road and "the sort of future we desire for the country" to Costaguana, she apprehends "simple and picturesque things that one would like to preserve" even in the dynamical changes. This scene shows the clear separation of Mrs Gould from her husband. The more San Tom mine develops, the bigger the gap grows between them. Finally Mrs Gould asks Mr Gould whether their colonial scheme for Costaguana "disturbed a good many stakes in that Paradise" (195).

Ironically, the white colonial woman's failed dream is the very reason that she can be the "true" reflector on the colonial situation. Separating from men's world, she realizes the horrible "truth" of colony and what had been done under the name of development and enlightenment. She also perceives that what white men did to "help" natives is only terrible exploitation. As the most virtuous character in *Nostromo*, Mrs Gould apprehends the San Tom mine as constructed on the basis of the human bones of the natives:

Mrs Gould knew the history of the San Tomé mine. Worked in the early days mostly by means of lashes on the backs of slaves, its yield had been paid for in its own weight of human bones. Whole tribes of Indians had perished in the exploitation. (75)

Finally she confesses that Charles Gould's effort was the "most awful materialism" (99). San Tomé mine, once her bright dream, is now degenerated into a dreadful evil.

### 3. What Did White Colonial Women Accomplish?

At one level, the intention of white male authors to use the white women characters to reflect on and critique the colonial white society seems successful. Their colonial critique of white women derives from their own experience, which makes the readers sympathize more easily with their views. However, I want to suggest that their critique of colonial British society is limited for the following reasons.

Firstly, it is undeniable that white women as minor observers offer sharp observations of colonial life, but their criticisms remain in the private sphere and cannot incite any public change. White colonial women discover the corruption of colonialism because of their marginal position. Ironically, this position prohibits them from taking action beyond individual reflection.

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 for ever" (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.

Secondly, white women are depicted in an idealized way. Both Mrs Moore and Mrs Gould are worshipped as goddesses by the natives. For instance, when they

hear about the death of Mrs Moore, natives compare her to their indigenous goddess, "Esmiss Esmoor" (212). Especially Aziz swears loyalty and devotion toward her:

She was perfect as always, his dear Mrs Moore. All the love for her he had felt at the mosque welled up again, the fresher for forgetfulness. There was nothing he would not do for her. He would die to make her happy. (123)

Similarly, in *Nostromo*, Father Rom n describes Mrs Gould as an angel. "The English senora was evidently a heretic; but at the same time she seemed to him wonderful and angelic" (338).

This idealization of female identity relates to the Victorian feminine ideal. Both Mrs Moore and Mrs Gould are married women. This means that women are idealized as chaste wives and mothers. In the Victorian mentality, women were guaranteed their moral authority as long as they stayed within the boundary of home (Duby 192). This shows that the idealization of white women runs the danger of biological reductionism. The power of female morality did not include the unmarried, single women whose sexuality could not be controlled by patriarchic rules.

Lastly, we need to discuss the problem of balancing power between native men and white women. The first goal of white male authors when they deal with the colonial problem is to reflect on white society. They refuse the colonial history of underestimating native people. However, they find that it is impossible for white man to be a friend of the native. In *A Passage to India*, Ronny emphasizes that his purpose is "to do justice and keep the peace" in the colony (45). Just as Fielding and Aziz cannot remain friends, white men are not able to become one with natives due to their absolute superior power in the colonial context.

Therefore, it is natural for Forster and Conrad to give white women the role of balancing the power between British colonizers and natives without underestimating native culture. White women are not, cannot be colonialists, so they are different from the white male governors. White women are "inferior" to native men in terms of their gender while they are "superior" to the native men in terms of their race. Futhermore, because white women are "other" even in white society, it is much easier for them to have generosity and understand the

others than white men.

However, the power balance between white women and native men also excludes the native women. Although *A Passage to India* and *Nostromo* show a new kind of reflection on the British colony, these works do not consider the position of native woman as an independent individual. Where the native men share the power and profit of imperialism or attempt rebellion, native women still remain "savages." In the following passage in *A Passage to India*, we see English ladies being surprised at native women speaking English:

"Oh yes, they're English-speaking."

"But now we can talk; how delightful!" cried Adela, her face lighting up.

"She knows Paris also," called one of the onlookers.

"They pass Paris on the way, no doubt," said Mrs Turton, as if she was describing the movements of migratory birds. Her manner had grown more distant since she had discovered that some of the group was westernized, and might apply her own standards to her. (38-39)

Here, Mrs Turton shows her contempt for native women. The conflict of native society and inequality between native man and woman does not concern white women in the novels.

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*Key Words* postcolonialism, feminism, Conrad, Forster