Colonial Domestication as Conservation: Reading the Fallacy in Joy Adamson’s - The Spotted Sphinx

Jhani S, D Yogananda Rao
1 Jain (Deemed–to–be University), Bangalore, India
2 Dept. of English, Jain (Deemed–to–be University), Bangalore, India

Abstract
Ever since Edward Said’s Orientalism and Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth was published postcolonial theory has become an integral theoretical tool of analysis in English studies, especially in the once colonized countries. Most of these studies have focused on how the minds and bodies of the natives were colonized. On similar lines the paper presents an argument that the knowledge produced about conservation by West was used as a disciplinary tool to exercise power in the colonized land on both wildlife and people. It also points out that the privileged status of knowledge that originated from the West strengthened its conservation discourse and changed the relationship of colonized people with their native land and wildlife. The paper accomplishes this by analyzing the different tenets of conservation presented in the selected text. It examines the non-fictional literary conservation narrative The Spotted Sphinx (1969) written by female Western conservationist Joy Adamson. In the process the research paper will argue that the colonial politics has been an integral part of the Western conservation rhetoric by using the postcolonial reading practices in conjunction with ecocritical praxis.

Keywords
Postcolonial Ecocriticism, African Wildlife Narratives, Western Conservation

I. Introduction
African wildlife narratives as a genre are written largely by Western conservationists who represent colonial power. These narratives, over a period of time, have come to play a vital role in the creation and reinforcement of the Western conservation rhetoric. In the post independent African context, these narratives have served as subtle tools in the perpetuation of colonial domination. In most of these wildlife narratives produced by the West, it is possible to notice the portrayal of the White conservationists abandoning the comforts of civilization and striving hard in the harsh and near inhospitable terrains of colonized land. The colonized lands unlike their lands and are characterized with exotic animal species. The White conservationists are often seen rescuing natives from their own natural habitat inclusive of animals, educating natives about their wildlife and thus promoting their indispensable status in the colonized land. In the process, these White conservationists are presented as self-driven by altruism and compassion towards wildlife of the colonized land and the wildlife which is pictured as exotic. These writing practices eventually led to the naturalization of Western conservation rhetoric in the minds of colonized. So strongly is this entrenched in the imagination of people that several decades after the African nations attained political self-determination, the nations still identify conservation with White conservationists. This paper will argue that the imposition of the Western conservation practices not only conferred a cult status on the White conservationists, but also that the West’s conservation practices derived out of West’s human-nature construct that realigned the native human-nature relationship. The paper will subject the celebrated conservationist Joy Adamson’s The Spotted Sphinx published in 1969 to a close reading to identify the traits of colonial conservation politics embedded in the Western conservation narratives.

In the year 1956 George Adamson and Joy Adamson adopted one out of three cubs of the lioness, which was killed by George Adamson in a wild encounter. The episodes of adoption, training and release of this cheetah named Pippa by Joy Adamson into the wild is recorded in the books named The Spotted Sphinx and Pippa’s Challenge. Joy Adamson during her stay at East African Reserve is seen renaming native staff by their nature of work in the pretext of finding it difficult to pronounce their names owing to its African tone. Whereas, on the other hand she has no difficulty in referring to African lakes, rivers, mountains and other places of the Reserve by their equally African names. Throughout the book she denotes the native Africans as “cook”, “local”, “gun man”, “assistant”, “warden” etc. and never by their names. These are the natives helping her with various activities in the Reserve right from pitching the tent, taking care of Pippa, protecting her from predators or poachers and cooking. This is a clear indication of her Eurocentric behaviour.

In the first half of the book The Spotted Sphinx, we see Joy Adamson busy with the shooting crew of the movie Born Free, her trips to England and USA for the promotion of the movie, during which Pippa gives birth to her first set of cubs and is taken care of by local and the assistant. Yet, Joy Adamson is highly vocal in stating that Pippa was uncomfortable with the local in comparison to herself. Also, the natives are described to be idle and lazy who constantly require strict supervision from White settlers to make them work. This image of natives is repeatedly seen throughout the narrative. For instance, while Guitu (native scout) and Joy Adamson goes searching for missing Pippa: Guitu was supposed to have gone ahead tracking but I did not find him at Pippa’s turn off so I traced his footprints to Kenmare Lodge where I found him chatting with the wives of some of the Game scouts. A task he preferred over tracing Pippa. He was popular with the girls but at that moment he was less popular with me. (Adamson 1969:112)

More specifically, this projected view of African natives’ idleness can be analyzed in accordance with David Maughan-Brown’s description of colonial settler’s ideology, which was in circulation in Kenya during 1960′s. According to Maughan-Brown, a colonial settler constructs polarity between the virtues of colonial settler and the vices of African natives. A colonial settler considers native agriculturalists as lazy and incompetent. Further, their written documents portray natives as poachers, thieves and ungrateful individuals who are involved in drug abuse, brutal rapes and murders (Maughan-Brown 1985:73).

Here the binary constructed between Western conservationists and African natives is in line with colonial thinking. At the same time, it is interesting to know the position of Pippa in the narrative. Along with representing natives as possessing animalistic characters, a few of which they share with Pippa. But, Pippa on the other hand is preferred over natives and is attributed with human qualities as
that of Western conservationist. Pippa is picturized as the main companion of Joy Adamson and she describes its role in making of her identity:

She, like Elsa had come to me at a very vulnerable age and drew heavily on my maternal instinct. The relationship between the two of us was therefore more than that of good companions. (Adamson 1969:81)

Though it depicts Joy Adamson’s bonding with Pippa, it brings to forefront the position of Pippa as a colonial subject, which has learnt to live with the colonialist’s culture and its products. This can be seen in Pippa’s fondness in drinking from the milk bottle, playing with the ball and Taga’s (leopard cub) liking towards the milk powder tin, Joy Adamson’s chair amongst other objects. The illustrations in the book even include pictures of Pippa playing with the ball, drinking juice from the bottle with a plastic straw, Taga playing with the milk powder tin and climbing the chair. These objects act as symbols, which signify British colonial values. Pippa thus becomes “one of the mimic men, a colonial subject aiming at subsuming the culture of the colonizer” (Bhabha 1994:87). Pippa becomes an intrinsic part of the Western conservationist’s family as the narrative hints at her rebirth into colonial culture:

Pippa hopped out of the car, walked into the dining room unconcerned by all the dash for safety, sat in a ladylike fashion at our table and behaved with perfect manners throughout our meal. (Adamson 1969:14)

Though Pippa is much more than a pet, its behaviour is described to be as that of a retriever. “It was fascinating that Pippa ‘classified’ as a cat, should have such a strong retrieving instinct, yet another characteristic in common with the dog” (Adamson 1969:63). Almost identical to a dog, Pippa spends its day chasing away smaller creatures which are endemic to East Africa. Joy Adamson thus takes up the position of a master who provides a new identity for Pippa. Thus, the narrative sets Pippa apart from the Africanness.

Further, Pippa’s dislike towards the other wild lions of the film unit alienates them as violent and threatening. Untamed lions in her works are discussed as “cultural other”. Joy Adamson describes mating between Ugás (domesticated lion) and Henrietta (untamed lioness) as a ferocious way of making love. Thus, she categorizes lionness to be uncivilized in its mannerisms, from an anthropocentric and colonial point of view:

She chased the poor fellow from his comfortable position, dashed at him repeatedly, at one moment making a lightning strike at him, the next crouching low, growling with bared teeth while preparing for another vigorous attack. Ugás tolerated Henrietta’s provocation like a gentleman, but certainly she was behaving more like an outraged Xanthippe than an amorous partner……I became worried for poor Ugás. I thought if this was lion-style wooing, it was a rough way of showing one’s affection and Ugás seemed to agree with me. (Adamson 1969:33)

Joy Adamson is involved in the act of depicting a wild lion’s way of life as barbaric in contrast to the lions domesticated by George Adamson through her description. Also, her comment that Ugás (domesticated lion by her husband) seemed to dislike Henrietta’s (not domesticated by them) way of approach portray Ugás as a civilized animal under their supervision, who dislikes Henrietta’s uncivilized behavior. This forms a clear reflection of Joy Adamson’s impression about animals in the wild as inferior and not civilized. This explains Joy Adamson’s action of taking up a self-assigned task of taming the animals in the name of conservation. On the other hand, the reason for barbaric representation of animals by Joy Adamson can be seen as the result of her Western cultural conditioning.

It is important to note that Joy Adamson’s conservation narrative is almost devoid of any references to African native experiences; there is no mention of traditional conservation methods employed by natives and no agency provided for natives to express their views. Thus, upholding the politics of race, which is a significant feature of colonial discourse. Instead the narrative prefers animals over natives, which can be read as Western conservationist’s denial of Africa, Africanness, natives and their values. It is through the construction of Pippa, a medium through which West and Africa interact with each other. Else the narrator always prefers the safe place, which is her segregated camp site. One can observe that it is Pippa which negotiates between West and Africa and not the White conservationist. Joy Adamson preserves her role in the colonial order of things, where she is portrayed superior to all natives and animals and constructs their identities as polluted and less pure than hers. The representation of these contaminated identities can be observed as ‘the tropes of dirt and disgust’ (Nyman 2003:101) which are an intrinsic part of Western conservation narrative.

This can be observed when Joy Adamson narrates Pippa’s sanitary habits as good, where Pippa is seen placing her droppings far from the camp site. This is indicative of human dislike towards excrement, whereas Pippa’s fondness towards elephant droppings that it uses to play with as a ball is indicative of the natural tendency of Pippa to leave the culture and move towards nature. It can be argued that Pippa was able to resist her natural behaviour to an extent due to the domestication by the colonial family.

Yet, there is a total change in its behaviour during the mating season and Pippa slowly recluses itself from the human construct of culture. This pushes Pippa to live in the margins whereas; Joy Adamson continues to live in her social construct of culture. This reiterates the Western division of nature and culture. Pippa here becomes a representative of colonized natives and in a broader context it puts forth the colonial ideology that it’s a futile attempt by the colonized to imitate Whiteness.

The title of the chapters in the book The Spotted Sphinx carries an air of domination and control. For instance, we can see titles such as ‘I take charge of Pippa’, ‘I decide to return Pippa to the wild’ and ‘I get into trouble’. In this case, the term ‘I’ is undoubtedly indicative of the extension of anthropocentric power of Joy Adamson over the cheetah named Pippa which does not have any agency to represent itself. The titles clearly show that it is Joy Adamson who decides on behalf of the animal and she is the one who has complete authority over Pippa. On the contrary, Pippa should have been a part of immense forests of Africa far from the clutches of any human being, unlike the one domesticated and monitored by Joy Adamson. Throughout the book, Pippa is represented as being dependent solely on Joy Adamson for food (dependent in learning hunting skills too), physical protection and emotional connection. Pippa is one such cheetah domesticated by Joy Adamson’s British friends and given to her care during their relocation back to West. Human emotions are abundantly attributed to Pippa by Joy Adamson. This act of assigning human qualities to animals is anthropomorphic in nature and can be understood as an influence of her Western education system.

For instance, she describes an incident where Joy Adamson laughed at Pippa for its comical look due to sand smeared face and the laugh seemed to have hurt Pippa’s feelings. The usage of adjectives like poor, helpless, ignorant, little, tiny to the domesticated cheetah, indicates Joy Adamson’s attempt to portray the animal incapable of striving in the wild without her intervention. This dependency of Pippa as portrayed by Joy Adamson further supports the idea
of Western superiority and makes her the unanimous protector of Pippa. Thus, with the help of narratives she establishes an image of herself as a selfless guard of Pippa. Whereas, in terms of conservation the entire act of domesticating a cheetah and then relocating it into wild would not serve any fruitful purpose. Instead it leads to the creation of romanticized wildlife in her books, a renowned conservationist status and above all a lucrative business in the name of conservation.

Finally, in the narrative Pippa’s return to the wild generates in the readers a sense of missing and mourning, which is elicited by the narrator onto the readers. Also, it can be observed that Joy Adamson expresses her concern for environmentalism and mourns the loss of African endangered animals. It is considered as the ‘imperialist nostalgia’ by Renato Rosaldo in his book Culture and Truth. According to him, these ‘nostalgic representations of imperial culture are the ways in which West mourn the passing away of what they themselves have transformed’ (Rosaldo 1989:69). Thus, Joy Adamson’s mourning over loss of African wildlife can be understood as a Western conservationist’s politics of conservation, a fallacy of domestication and conservation to deny the effects of colonialism on African wildlife. Western conservation narratives are thus a White man’s attempt to establish oneself as innocent and not the destroyer of African wildlife through colonization.

References

Jhansi is a MPhil Research Scholar at Jain (Deemed-to-be) University. Her background in Molecular Biology (MSc Molecular Biology) and English Literature (MA English Literature) has helped in understanding the nuances of Bio-centric and Human-centric approaches of conservation. Her hunger for knowledge and determination to turn information into action has contributed to her most recent success at Jain University by securing a gold medal on completion of MA English Literature and is continuing her research work (PhD) in the area of Ecocriticism. She is fueled by her passion of ever learning and teaching. She considers herself a ‘forever student’ eager to both build on her academic foundations and stay in tune with the practical conservation techniques through coursework.

D Yogananda Rao currently teaches in the Post-graduate Department of English, Jain University, Bengaluru. He has taught English at both Undergraduate and Post-graduate levels in well-known colleges in Bangalore for over 32 years. He a post-graduate of Bangalore University and also holds MPhil [Thesis Title: Animal Narratives as Social and Cultural Texts] and PhD Degrees; his doctoral thesis was on popular culture and literature [Thesis Title: “Licence to Thrill” – Mapping the Literary Origins and Sociology of Thriller Narratives]. Yogananda Rao has edited several books and published over 40 research papers in national and international journals apart from being on the editorial and review panels of reputed journals. He is on the Board of Studies of several universities and colleges in India and also is supervising M Phil and PhD research dissertations. His areas of interest are: Popular Culture Studies, Ecocriticism, Indian Drama, Curriculum and Research Designs.