An Exploration of Western Colonialism represented in the poem “Civilization-spurns--the Leopard!”

This poem is written in the form of a rhetorical, persuasive, legalistic plea made on the behalf a leopard that has been displaced from its natural habitat and placed in the confines of a “cage”; metaphorically the confines of civilization. This poem through its use of the symbolism, and metaphors the of civilization and the leopard, explores the relationship between an imperialistic, western and colonial power, and its colonies; categorizing it as being exploitative, hypocritical and structural.

Two entities are mentioned in the first line, who continue to constitute the opposing characters throughout this poem: The Civilization and the Leopard. The kind of civilization can be largely inferred from the poem as being Western, Globalized, Industrialized, Principled, Educated and Colonialist. The civilization is Western due to a number of inferences: the mention of Asia as belonging to the leopard, to whom the civilization is unaccustomed; the portrayal and use of imagery such as the leopard, deserts, Ethiopia, gold and palms as “exotic” and foreign, both geographically and culturally, to the civilization; the use of English; and the setting and content of the poem which is a legalistic plea addressed to a western, English speaking audience and adjudicator. The civilization is Globalized in that this seemingly western civilization has exposure and access to other geographical locations such as Asia and Ethiopia and palms and deserts, which are not native or associated with western culture or countries. It is Industrialized since in order to have the means to travel great distances to foreign lands and be exposed to other cultures in the world, they would’ve had to have been somewhat technologically developed; at least for the overseas travels to Asia by ships. It is a Principled civilization since a rigid paradigm of morality and social customs has been established so as to validate the feelings of contempt against the leopard who does not seem to conform to this paradigm; it’s source being mainly religion and race. The civilization is Educated due to the fact that medicine exists; a hallmark of education and knowledge such as the “balm” which is used to treat maladies. Metaphorically the balm can be likened to religion or societal norms, where there exists an established institution of knowledge which is passed on from one generation to the next that uniformly informs that society’s understanding of the world. Lastly, it is Colonialist based on the historical domination of western civilizations over countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East which is based on a self-assured, elitist belief in the superiority of their culture, religion, education, genetic ancestry, right to life and eternal happiness; in the poem itself the leopard, a symbol of the east, is being tamed and caged in by a keeper, who is a manifestation of the western civilization, who thinks of the leopard as wild, untamed, uncivilized, base and in need of “treatment” or subjugation.

The speaker appears to be a rhetorician, or even a lawyer, who is trying to plead for compassion towards the leopard whose nature is predetermined and “natural” and not under the control of the leopard
which cannot be changed by any correctional measures of the civilization such as narcotics or balms, which only serve as palliative measures of drug induced amnesia to control and suppress the Leopard’s “memories of palm”. The leopard represents a nature that is wild, free spirited and free from the confines of civilization, one that is different and therefore in opposition to a civilization that demands control, submission and uniformity. The nature of a foreign colony is physically and metaphorically compared to the leopard and her appearance: satin, gold, customs, gown, her memories of palm and of her home in Asia. The features described of the leopard are ones of wealth and royalty such as “satin”, “gold”, “gowns”, and “customs” (or traditions). This could be a metaphor of the richness of culture or wealth of character that a foreign country has, which is appreciated by those other than the civilization; this is evident through the personification of “deserts”, which does not rebuke the leopard’s appearance. To the civilization, however, this wealth is not recognized, and the symbols of traditional wealth are described as “tawny”, “spotted” and “Ethiopian”, as if it being foreign made it worthy of disdain. The archaic usage of the word “Ethiopian” is to refer to a person of African descent, which further confirms an ethnocentric interpretation of the leopard by the civilization. The speaker insists that the characteristics that make the leopard distinctively itself does not validate it being “spurned” by society and rhetorically asks the listener to reconsider their characterization of the leopard as “bold” and as something that needs to be “frowned” upon. In the second stanza, the speaker presents a plea for pity for the leopard who has left her home in Asia, is unaccustomed to the new society and is plagued by memories of her former life and of freedom. The “narcotics” and “balm” are representative of the agents of civilization, such as religion, education, internalized racism, classism and employment opportunities which were often used by colonizing countries to gain a foothold and influence in a “less developed” foreign country to “correct” and “modernize” the colony, often at the expense of the actual inhabitants of the colony. The speaker argues that even these measures aren’t sufficient to break the indomitable spirit and identity of the colonized country.

The audience of this poem and to whom the plea is being addressed to is alluded to as “Signor”, an Italian formal address for a man. Therefore, the audience that the speaker directly appeals to in the poem is a male authoritative figure; a manifestation of authority which could be secular (a judge), religious (a priest or clergyman), or even celestial (God). The leopard in this poem is decidedly female and is given feminine pronouns with a lot of emphasis on her outward appearance all of which greatly inform the power dynamic of the civilization over the leopard as the colonial power over the colony and now the male over the female. The leopard (metaphorically a colonial land) is deemed “impure”, “uncultured”, or “wild” if it does not adhere to the dominant society’s standard of civilization, just as a woman who does not conform to society’s expectations of her is deemed sinful.
Moreover, a woman is traditionally considered the weaker sex and more prone to fall prey to male aggression. A man can coerce a woman, force himself upon her and take complete advantage of her, after which she is stripped of her pride, dignity and value as a woman in society which is attributed to the loss of her chastity and virginity. This imagery is further supported with the mention of a spotted gown, perhaps with blood, of which she is conscious or embarrassed of. Similarly, a colony is exploited by the colonist, where all, pride, dignity and value in terms of wealth from raw materials and a healthy workforce, are funneled away to the colonist, leaving the native inhabitants of the land bereft of any national identity, pride, economic means, and in a constant state of structural and educational poverty, which again is used by the colonizer to discriminate against the natives.

The hypocrisy of western civilization is depicted through dramatic irony. Colonial countries were typically painted as brutes, savages with lessened moral compasses and emotional reasoning, and warranting of western dominance. In the poem, however, the leopard, which in western literature is traditionally associated with wilderness and sensuousness, is given actions that require a high amount of emotional intelligence and rationality (attributes of western civilization) such as self-consciousness, memory and resilience while the western civilization is described as aggressive, punitive, “spurning”, and “frowning” and imprisoning an innocent creature. Therefore, the legitimacy of the western civilization’s claim to moral and social high ground is brought under scrutiny by the reader. The seat of true freedom is also called into question by the reader. Who is truly free? The leopard who physically lacks free will and is imprisoned and punished but is free to act out her primitive impulses, or the civilization who is ostensibly allowed to carry out free will but under societal constraints, unable to act on his natural instincts. This undermines the western claim of freedom, independence, and a higher order of living.

Thematically the poem centers around the biblical allusion to several passages in the Old Testament from the Book of Jeremiah: the poem’s diction (“Leopard, Ethiop, Spotted) most importantly resembling the passage:

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?

Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil.

Jeremiah, chapter 13, verse 23

Moreover, structurally the poem complies with the passage by including two separate rhetorical questions in line 2 and in line 9. The use of these metaphors, given its biblical context, to prove the innocence of the leopard (and of a colonial country) is ironic. In the bible God, through Jeremiah, uses the metaphor of a leopard being unable to change its spots and the Ethiopian to change his skin color, which are natural
predispositions, to highlight the fact that human beings are naturally predisposed to committing sins and accustomed to doing evil; a condition which it cannot be changed, since it is only the power of God that is able to truly change us and grant salvation. Given this context the plea for the leopard’s innocence is underscored with a tone of condescension and it makes us question the true extent of the speakers’ belief that the leopard is being wrongfully persecuted.

The true, dire nature of the predicament that the leopard is put under is highlighted by the structural irony of the fact that, as previously mentioned, the “signor” or the ultimate authority that decides the clemency of the leopard is a manifestation of authority which could be secular (a judge), religious (a priest or clergyman) or celestial (God). All of these representations of power are western manifestation of authority and morality, and in that respect, they would be more likely to agree with western sensibilities of scorn against the leopard and a country that does not conform to their ideals of morality. This makes the legitimacy and validity of remaining a colonial power and exploiting colonies, structurally impervious to any moral reasoning, since the authorities themselves are agents of this subjugation. This poem could therefore be a more abstract critique of a kind of power or a habit of mind, that is expressed in a variety of political and personal relationships; a kind of power that is not explicitly wielded on the weaker in society, but all the while self-sustaining and inescapable.