Decolonizing Kate: D. H. Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent* as a Critique of Modern Western Individualism*

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As Theresa Mae Thompson maintains, D. H. Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent* deals with “the real transformation occurring in Lawrence’s vision” (224), a crucial part of which is “unlearning Europe.”¹ By giving a postcolonial edge to what Thompson suggests, I would like to go a little further in this essay and argue that *The Plumed Serpent* concerns the process of decolonizing Kate. As a matter of fact, the decolonization of Kate has more than one meaning: Kate is not only European (or Western) but also Irish, Ireland being both a country once under colonial rule for hundreds of years and a country supporting British imperialism throughout the world. Although Kate seems to be present in the novel as “a European,” the novel—as well as Kate herself—notes that she is Irish as well. Kate’s dubious identity both as the colonized and the colonizer is not a trivial matter; indeed, if this is the case, *The Plumed Serpent*, when focused on Kate, can be regarded as a novel about decolonizing Ireland represented by Kate as much as about decolonizing Mexico. Little wonder that at one point in the novel, when Kate expresses her wish to return to Europe, Ramón

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tells her that the Irish should do the same thing as demanded of the Mexican people:

‘…I want to go back for a little while.’
‘Ah yes! Better go and then come again. Tell them in your Ireland to do as we have done here.’
‘But how?’
‘Let them find themselves again, and their own universe, and their own gods. Let them substantiate their own mysteries. The Irish have been so wordy about their far-off heroes and green days of the heroic gods. Now tell them to substantiate them, as we have tried to substantiate Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli.’ (426-27)

Thus The Plumed Serpent is not merely a “fantasy” about the possibilities of the restoration of precolonial Mexican religion and culture, but also a realistic novel where the decolonization of Ireland is suggested. However, I am not saying that Kate is portrayed as more Irish than European in the novel, the reason being that, as Kate seems to have been completely assimilated into the colonizer’s culture, the task of decolonizing Kate means that colonialism will meet a slower death in her.

Given the underlying anti-colonial themes of The Plumed Serpent, it is interesting to note that only a few Western critics have discussed Lawrence’s views on decolonization. They tend to think Kate more European than Irish; although agreeing that the novel covers an encounter between a European woman and Mexicans, they stress that Kate represents Europe and her perspective is a Western one. While seeing Kate this way is somewhat inevitable—as I said, it implies the completeness of Kate’s psychological colonization—this kind of criticism is only half-true. More recently, therefore, several critics have begun to read the novel from a postcolonial perspective.

In this paper, through an examination of the novel’s concern with decolonizing Kate, I redress this imbalance, making the case that an emphasis on Kate’s being Irish can challenge how the novel has been traditionally appraised. Here, I focus on individualism as an ideology for Kate to unlearn before she is decolonized. The issue of individualism is a