ISSN: 2527-8037

Proceedings of the 1st English Education International Conference (EEIC) in conjunction with the 2nd Reciprocal Graduate Research Symposium (RGRS) of the Consortium of Asia-Pacific Education Universities (CAPEU) between Sultan Idris Education University and Syiah Kuala University

November 12-13, 2016, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

THE IMAGININGS OF THE FEMALE OTHER IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *AN OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS*

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Abstract
This article examines the imaginings of the female Other identified by Joseph Conrad in his novel An Outcast of the Islands. The novel has its setting in Sambir, a fictitious settlement situated within the Malay cultural and social milieu. The research focuses on the love/hate relationship between Willems, a Dutchman stranded in Sambir and Aissa, the daughter of an Arab pirate and a Malay mother. The research contextualizes the analysis by articulating the theory of dialogism as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, an author of a literary text represents only one of the many voices inherent in a discourse; he does not have the power to unify the supposed centrality of his textual perspectives. When an author conjures a range of different fictional characters in his novel he does not merely summon plausible characters to make the thematic trajectory of his novel more cohesive; rather, this allows for different voices to intrude into the whole discourse, whether acknowledged by the author or otherwise. By utilizing this concept the researcher proposes a counter-hegemonic discourse by intruding into the narrative of the text. The strategy is to insert the voice of the reader as a countervailing discursive force to reveal Conrad's essentially and ideologically-loaded discursive construction of the female natives. The paper suggests that Conrad's portrayal of Aissa resonates with common Eurocentric views of Eastern woman as being close to nature and far from culture. Being a female Other she is alluring and mysterious, diabolical and devious. The implication of this research forces us to question a one-sided dialectical representation and monolithic representation of the female Other by Western writers as represented by Conrad.

Keywords*: Contestory voices, monolithic representation, dialogism, counter-hegemonic discourse.*

INTRODUCTION

Early and late, Conrad's fiction shows the native girl, whatever her personal character, as the embodiment of a spirit of place essentially hostile to the wandering European attracted by her fateful glamor (Inniss, 1970, p. 39).

Joseph Conrad is, doubtlessly, one of the most prominent writers writing in English especially at the turn of the nineteenth-century when European powers, principally England, ruled the waves, lands and peoples. Conrad is also notable for setting his Eastern fictions in the Malay Archipelagoes. Lord Jim, Almayer's Folly and Outcasts of the Islands are some of the examples. In these texts there are unavoidable cultural cross-currents between European and Eastern values. However, as a writer who himself represents European values, Conrad cannot avoid from falling into the trap of Eurocentric ideological discourse about the East. For example, the Malay women in Joseph Conrad's Malay fictions, Mrs. Almayer and Aïssa, are consistently portrayed as savages, semi-savages, violent, diabolical, irrational and sensual. Conrad's descriptions of Malay female characters typically render

Malay culture as beneath Europe's high civilisation in the production of cultural discourse and its Malay women doubly othered as a subordinate section of that culture. The descriptions by Conrad are consonant with wider Western representational practices that fill in the yet unexplored Malay world and serve as markers of the position of European culture vis-à-vis the Other. What the practices - apparent in fiction, travel narratives, visual arts and political and cultural tracts - share are similar racial, philosophical and political ideological underpinnings. "Blank space" (Conrad, 1995, p. 21) in *Heart of Darkness* is the phrase Marlow the narrator uses to explain the still uncharted lands of the world before the coming of European explorers and colonisers. The Malay world was not as precious as India, the jewel in the crown of British imperialism. It did not draw as much frenzied interest from European powers as Africa did during the scramble for that continent following the Berlin Conference of 1885. But the Malay world was yet another blank to fill, another mysterious East to uncover and to insert into the Western epistemology of the Orient. There was topography to measure and chart, peoples to describe and cultures to explain. It was a theatre for the enactment of the colonial mission, a mission taken up, with varying degrees of willingness and enthusiasm, by early administrators, travel writers, missionaries, philanthropists and eventually novelists. The *savage* Malay world, like any other non-European world, needed to be civilised to the mould of European ideas of progress.

But Joseph Conrad is not your everyday colonialist. For a writer living in an era of colonial expansion he shows a remarkable insight into the operation of colonialism and feels a sense of repulsion towards its true motives and stated justifications. While most colonialist writers would, in one way or another, buttress or support the purportedly benevolent aims of colonialism, Conrad is radical in his exposé of the contradictions between European words and deeds. When Chinua Achebe first labelled Conrad, in the strongest terms, a "a bloody racist" (Achebe, 1990, p. 124) for denying Africans that individuality he gives to Europeans (Achebe, 1990, pp. 119-129) in *Heart of Darkness*, his accusation caused considerable debate among academics as to its validity. Terry Collits considers Achebe's argument for Conrad being racist as his error of "misread[ing] *Heart of Darkness* as a stable embodiment of Conrad's political beliefs and attitude towards blacks" (Collits, 2005, p. 98), in that Achebe views Marlow's ideological stance as a narrator as representing that of Conrad the author. Collits explains:

> Conrad's text contains, but is not contained by, Marlow's limited and prejudice-ridden liberalism. Marlow embodies the liberal-humanist ideology that underpinned European imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century: the civilizing mission, the work ethic, and the superiority of civilized man (Collits, 2005, p. 99).

Collits further highlights the contestatory nature of the debate[1] when he states that the book which R. B. Cunninghame Graham considered as "anti-imperialist" in that it "challenge[s] the old colonial novel's implicit claim to omniscience is read by Achebe as a reductive account by a European of the African world of his own grandparents" (Collits, 2005, p. 99).

Conrad admits that he drew his inspiration for *An Outcast of the Islands* from a real-life social pariah whom he met in Sambir. In his "Author's Note," Conrad acquaints the reader with the fate of the man on whom he modelled Willems: his betrayal of the location of a river to some Arab merchants earned him the intense hatred of his fellow Europeans and pariah status among them. But what interests us is that after he is rumoured to have embarked on an expedition on an Arab-owned steam-launch, Conrad's model for Almayer angrily voices a dark premonition of the fate of "Willems," "[o]ne thing's for certain; if he finds anything worth having up there they will poison him like a dog" (Conrad, 1975, p. 10) unintentionally or not invoking Eurocentric assumptions of the deceptive and treacherous character of the indigenes. This incident and "Almayer"'s outburst inspired Conrad and they provided the general plot of *An Outcast of the Islands*.

This incident is significant in two ways. One, it shows that the colonial endeavours in Malaya, and for that matter in other parts of the Eastern world, were driven by trade and exploitation of indigenous resources based on monopoly capitalism (in *An Outcast of the Islands*, before Abdulla breaks his monopoly, Almayer is the sole merchant who links local traders and producers to the

[1]For a discussion of racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* see the chapter "Conrad in the Postcolonial World".

outside market.) That the European community felt that "Willems" had committed the sin of breaking the trade monopoly speaks volumes about how Europeans conducted their trade. The second significant point concerns how Eurocentric ideology shapes European views of their rivals. "Almayer" was convinced that "Willems" would be eliminated by the Arabs once his expedition bore positive results to prevent him from divulging the secret location to anyone else. That Arabs, Chinese, Japanese, or Malays would be treacherous and malicious was a given, a stereotype reflected in various Western travelogues and journals. Similarly, the same assumption of inherently malicious tendency underpins Eurocentric representations of the female Other. Unlike the men who are viewed by Europeans as treacherous, the female Other is often portrayed as corrosive to the morality of any Western male who is trapped by her Eastern attractiveness.

There is a sketch of a young Eastern woman by Conrad made when work on *Almayer's Folly* was reaching its conclusion. The sketch was published in Jerry Allen's *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad*. We believe this graphic representation provides us a visual realisation of Conrad's mental perceptions and suppositions of an Eastern woman. As Shearer West argues, "[t]he proliferation of race theories in the nineteenth century was in no small part fuelled by both visual and verbal texts which served to plant certain ideas of race into the minds of their audiences" (West, 1996, p. 5). Furthermore, Tim Barringer argues that visual texts played a significant role in essentialising the concept of race in the consciousness of Victorians. As he explains:

> [n]ot only were visual representations of physiognomies and body-types read for signs of race: these representations also played an active role in establishing the tropes through which the idea of racial difference was articulated ... visual representations play an active and formative role in cultural discourses, notably that of race (Barringer, 1996, p. 35).

In Jerry Allen's text Conrad's sketch of the Eastern woman displays some visual resemblance to contemporary Orientalist photographs and paintings of Eastern women (Schick, 1990, p. 347). In Conrad's sketch, the woman is depicted as bosomy with luscious black hair and a peacock-tailed tiara adorning her head. She is dressed in a garment that suggests the sexual allure of an Oriental woman. The most perceptible aspect of this sketch is the python that she holds in her left hand near the upper section of its body. The head of the python, with its extended tongue, is close to her face. The rest of the reptile's slithery body swirls itself around her right arm, indicating familiarity rather than aggression. It is an amateurish sketch that if done by a lesser writer would have sunk into oblivion.

One cannot identify her cultural background by visual investigation nor does Conrad provide any explanation of his model. What is obvious is that she can be described as beautiful (in a cartoonish sense) and exotically alluring in the manner of the beautiful and seductive Aïssa in *An Outcast of the Islands.* Although *An Outcast of the Islands* would be the next instalment of Conrad's Malay texts, we presume, on the strength of the sketch, that he had already conceptualised the themes of the novel. Conrad's sketch exhibits Orientalist stereotyping of all Eastern, and not specifically Malay, women. As a general rule, beauty and lethality, and seduction and degeneration become their hallmark. The lure of such women serves as a reminder to male colonialists of the danger they would face in relationships with them. The presence of the reptile signifies a *femme fatale* quality but at the same time produces an exotic magnetism that may represent the indigenous woman as both the alluring and the feared. But whatever the circumstance, she will always remain an exotic mystery to a European male's mind.

Conrad would probably have read H. Rider Haggard's colonial novel *She* (1886) that features Ayesha as the villainous immortal Queen who was Arab by birth and Oriental in virtues, the likeness between Haggard's textual description of Ayesha and Conrad's pictorial sketch of the Eastern girl justifying this supposition. In his adventure tale Haggard describes Ayesha as an alluring "beauty made sublime ... and yet, the sublimity was a dark one" characterised by "deep acquaintance with grief and passion" (Haggard, 1979, p. 305). This description of Ayesha by Haggard resonates with Conrad's portrayal of Aïssa in *An Outcast of the Islands*. Equally interesting is Haggard's depiction of Ayesha as wearing an ornament of a double-headed snake that fastens her white kirtle, and like Conrad's Eastern girl she also wears sandals on her feet. It is a feature that Kenneth Inniss attributes to Conrad's limited artistic skills, although we conjecture that Conrad's sketch was partially inspired by Haggard's Ayesha.

The names of Conrad's Aïssa and Haggard's Ayesha are also almost alike. Moreover, Haggard's Ayesha's other name is She-who-must-be-obeyed. Similarly, Conrad's Aïssa is explained as possessing "something inarticulate and masterful which could not speak and would be obeyed" (Conrad, 1975, p. 66). Additionally, Haggard's Ayesha is described by the narrator as possessing "a certain serpent-like grace that was more than human" and in a later description the narrator comments that "this beauty, with all its awful loveliness and purity, was *evil*" (Haggard, 1979, p. 304). Comparatively, Conrad's descriptions of Aïssa are more sophisticated owing to, from my point of view, his greater deftness with language.

If we accept the justness of this comparison then Conrad's anti-heroic Malay novels and Haggard's colonial adventure fictions can be seen to share some of the same Orientalist values. As Brian Street states with regard to the perception of non-European societies by nineteenth-century writers:

> [t]he perception of other societies and their way of life by nineteenth-century writers is thus conditioned by a common set of ideas, however much individuals may vary within the limits of the framework given them by their own society (Street, 1975, p. 8).

Orientalist images of the female Other mostly revolve around the representations of Eastern sexual allure in visions of harems, concubines or geishas. There were almost universal assumptions of the licentiousness and unrestrained sexuality of the female Other or of her mysterious and puzzling conduct. These assumptions fit into the Eurocentric ideology of the savage as representing "violence, sexual license, a lack of civility and civilisation, an absence of morality or any sense of it" (Goldberg, 1993, p. 23).

As much as oriental women are placed on the fringe through discursive practices of othering, they are at the same time central to the colonialists' notion of sexual restraint being part of their own civilisation. The female Other, in this sense, inhabits a boundary of sexual and cultural difference. Thus, it is not surprising that the Orientalist theme of the exoticism, eroticism and danger of the Eastern women is repeated in Conrad's sketch. This practice of visual imagination that predicts Conrad's Eurocentric inclination also underpins his textual reality in *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*. As Barringer states in his analysis of the representations of otherness in Victorian visual media, "[i]t is not a question of individual intentionality but of a discourse of racial difference operating across a wide range of representational practices" (Barringer, 1996, p. 40).

DIALOGISM AS THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that we propose here is, in essence, a postcolonial discursive strategy. We propose a strategy to deconstruct the representations of the Malay female Other through the theoretical methodology of dialogism as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin. Dialogism as a discursive methodology as envisioned by Bakhtin is restricted to literary texts, especially the genre of the novel, and their interpretation. As Ketu Katrak explains, the novel as a genre "is particularly suited to postcolonial writers' rewriting history from the points of view of indigenous peoples that challenge colonial records from the British standpoint" (Katrak, 1996, p. 30). And, admittedly, Bakhtin does not explain dialogism as a theoretical discourse applicable to fields outside of literature such as politics and history or issues of Western colonialism and its ideological representations of the female Other. But, from our point of view, dialogism as a discursive tool is an embryonic and living methodology that is ever evolving to suit all intents and purposes. We may perhaps elucidate our appropriation of Bakhtin's dialogism with reference to Roland Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author.[2] Once the author has completed his or her text/method, the author can no longer claim full possession of or control over interpretation of his or her work.

[2]Barthes proposes the death of the author by suggesting that the author can never lay claim to the originality of his text as "the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture". The author is simply an imitator; his "sole power is to mingle writings." The same argument is also highlighted by T.S. Eliot where he suggests that a poet's work is never original as "the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously". See T.S Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", *Perspecta,* 19 (1982), 37. Also see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in Hazard Adams (ed.), *Critical Theory since Plato* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 1130-3. My quotation from Barthes is at 1132.

Before Bakhtin the history of the novel as a genre had been generally understood in terms of the artistic originality and the power of creativity of the author. Critics had always conceptualised the novel as representative of the author's consciousness. Our conventional wisdom would suppose that authors exclude narratives that do not share their worldview by silencing or erasing them from their narrative. As the master of their own tale they (presumably) dictate the way meanings are to be formed, interpreted and disseminated. In this scheme of things the readers are merely a passive mind whose function is to absorb all those meanings, overt or covert, intended for them by the author. In other words the reader plays no part whatsoever in the interaction with the novel or text. This scenario assumes a one-way communication of meaning with the author as the determiner of meanings and the reader as their passive receiver. As such the authors' station as the producers of words also confers to them as the sole arbiters of *truth*. This was the conception of the novel that held sway before Bakhtin's idea of dialogism helped reshape our understanding of representational discourse. In its stead, Bakhtin lays out a theory that, inter alia, posits the fragility of the author's authority as the sole arbiter of meaning.

The basis of Bakhtin's theory resides in the differences between genres, especially poetry and the novel, in their respective monologic and dialogic tendencies. Poetry, claims Bakhtin, is centripetal in nature because it does not refer to anything beyond itself due to its aesthetic values. It has no other ideology but its author's with reference to the object of its centralising ideas. The words of poetry as conceived by the poet are not addressed to an addressee, thus do not expect an answer. It is in this sense that poetry is monologic. The novel, on the other hand, is unable to be anything but polyphonic as author, narrators, characters and ideologies within a novel collide and collude with each other in the text. For Bakhtin the novel is the genre that presents the polyphonic nature of discourse by subverting the authorial voice of the narrator and presenting the varied voices inherent in the text. Taking Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as an example, Bakhtin shows how the author's voice has become only one of a multiplicity of voices contending for discursive and ideological space made possible by the genre's heteroglossic nature. These voices are not illustrative of interaction of ideas but of "the interaction of consciousnesses in the sphere of ideas (but not of ideas only)" (Bakhtin, 1987, p. 32).

For Bakhtin, authors simply represent one of the many voices inherent in a discourse; they no longer have the power to unify the supposed centrality of their perspectives. The novel represents "a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (Bakhtin, , 1987, p. 262). When authors conjure a range of different fictional characters in their novels they do not merely summon plausible characters to make the thematic trajectory of their novels more cohesive; rather, this allows for different voices to intrude into the whole discourse, whether acknowledged by the author or not. What Bakhtin envisions in fiction is a discourse not unlike the metaphorical Tower of Babel that allows for differing voices to be equally heard. But instead of the biblical collapse of the tower and the scattering of the peoples with different languages to all corners of the world, Bakhtin posits a more positive collapse of a single authorial voice of discourse and a celebration of a plurality of voices.

Earlier critics posited that the major character or characters presented their author's philosophical morality in the novel. Bakhtin saw this assumption as the main flaw of these methods of criticism: it came from looking at the novel through the prism of ideology and psychology and how those ideologies and psychical conditions are manifested in the characters. Instead Bakhtin proposes that to understand the full potential of a novel it should be seen, not only from ideological and psychological perspectives, but also in terms of the author's narrative style and structure. Only then will readers appreciate the polyphonic nature of the novel. By focusing on the style and formal structure of the novel, in contrast to the monologic interpretations of traditional literary and linguistic scholars, Bakhtin posits that Dostoyevsky's development of the novel gives voice to the varied ideological and social perspectives current at that point in time, providing an intellectual and social cross-section of late-nineteenth-century Russian society. As Bakhtin asserts:

> What unfolds in [Dostoevsky's] works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event (Bakhtin, , 1987, p. 6).

This view suggests the independence and will-to-life of characters once they are conjured into the text, beyond the author's intent and authorial control. Having minds and consciousnesses of their own they have their own ideologically-loaded views which may collude and collide with the author's own ideology.

In this sense, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism complements postcolonial discourse as a theoretical tool of resistance narrative. Postcolonial discourse, in general, functions as a method of writing back to the centre and serves, neither to nullify nor to rectify, but in some way to resolve issues between the centre and periphery. Dialogism, as a methodological criticism, could also be useful in other forms of discourse analysis, thereby "not restricting liberatory struggle to purely economic or political battles; instead ... extend[ing] it to the common patrimony of the utterance" (Stam, 1989, p. 8). Nor do these formulations abide by any rules of discursive engagement. Gwendolyn Henderson, for example, contends that the Bakhtinian model is principally adversarial and verbal communication is a form of contestation with other voices (Henderson, 2000, p. 20). Henderson is, in actuality, reminding us of the varying interpretations and utilisations of dialogism in discourse analysis. As Anne Hermann (1989, p. 148) also asserts, "[dialogism] does not refer to a harmonious dialogue based on amiable disagreement [but] to the struggle between antagonistic discourses." Indeed, neither Herman nor Henderson is the only voice to suggest the potentially antagonistic nature of dialogism. Similarly, in his interpretation of Bakhtin's dialogism, Michael Holquist (2002, p. xviii) hints at the contestatory model of the theory when he focuses on "struggle" and "battle" as being at the heart of dialogism, thereby indicating the polemical tendency of the theory. Bakhtin's dialogism only serves to lay the foundation of polyphony, of the possibility of a multi-voiced discourse within a narrative.

This interpretation of dialogism allows for a freer conceptualisation of the critical approach to suit almost any narrative strategy that falls under the broader form of dialogue. It is in this sense that dialogism, as a discursive tool, appeals to resistance discourse as it allows for the engagement with and nullifying of what can be perceived as the more authoritative and hegemonic perspectives presented by authors in their narratives. In the area of post-colonialism, beside *Orientalism* by Edward Said, which lays bare the Western ideological othering of non-Western worlds, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism functions as a theory that allows for the struggle against monolithic representation and for the voice of the marginalised Other to be heard within the same discourse. Dialogism empowers subalterns to break the power of hegemonic discourse over the oppressed and gives them the ability to tease out the suppressed voices of the subaltern in narratives.

THE COLONIAL IMAGINATION OF THE MALAY FEMALE OTHER

An Outcast of the Islands is certainly not a love story. A love story would, in principle, conclude with the lovers joining each other either in life or in death. The Biblical Samson and Delilah and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* represent those typical love stories that exemplify monumental love with tragic endings. Similarly Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, while tackling more complicated issues of class and gender, are basically romances that end happily. *An Outcast of the Islands* is neither. It is a literary allegory of the incompatibility of Europe and its Other and of the impossibility of a union between the two. *An Outcast of the Islands* is merely a literary realisation of this commonly held Eurocentric view. In *An Outcast of the Islands* Conrad interweaves psychological and cultural themes surrounding questions of morality and human fallibility on the one hand, and of colonialism and cultural clashes on the other. The major theme revolves around the complexity of European morality in an Eastern setting. The background settings in Conrad's Malay or African novels such as Sambir in *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, Patusan in *Lord Jim* and the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* are locations viewed as at the periphery of European civilisation. At the heart of these four novels is an assumption that once the protagonist is transposed into a setting at the periphery of European civilisation, laws and social conventions determining the conduct of individuals dissolve. As Conrad muses through Lingard, "a man does not live for years beyond the pale of civilized laws without evolving for himself some queer notions of justice" (Conrad, 1975, p. 193).

This view, if we look deeper than the surface, implies that there are no laws as defined from European perspectives that dictate how the local populace should conduct itself within the bounds of a cohesive society. It assumes that since there are no civilised laws in evidence, the white men

who trespass into local cultures do not have to subscribe to these local laws because they fail the standard of a European's sense of morality and justice. As a consequence any European man who ventures out into the non-European world carries with him a Robinson Crusoe mentality. The land itself is deemed *terra nullius* and, as such, is ready to be inscribed into European laws and customs.

But how did it come into being that an outsider could impose his will on a land that is not his own in the first place? The "queer notions of justice" that materialised in the European psyche are made possible through the ability of the European man to impose his power on the indigenous society. It is not the superiority of their laws that enabled Europeans to view indigenous society as bereft of any meaningful code of conduct, but their "power over it; a power relation which applied equally, but differently, to fiction and painting as it did to government reports" (Lewis, 1996, p.180). This confidence in their power enabled Europeans to dictate which laws were superior and which were inferior. Lingard holds the power over the Malay world, as much as Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* does over the Congolese, through superior firearms and knowledge of the world, thereby enabling him (and other Europeans) to determine whose laws apply in which place.

Those ideas of laws are intertwined with the idealisms of European morality because the conception and application of laws as part of a process of social construction determined European society as being civilised and cultured. This is in opposition to the perceived anarchy of the non-European worlds and their closeness to and semblance of nature.[3] As such, there was always the constant worry of European man losing his civilised self once he was no longer bound by European laws and social conventions. This theme of the actual practices of Europeans and the discussion of their conduct vis-à-vis those ideas and idealisms would naturally spill over to the realm of literature, as Conrad's texts testify. Thus, we find Kurtz and Lingard both sharing the idealism constitutive of the European civilising mission in its notion of the dispensation of civilisation and justice to the savages or semi-savages. This idealism includes the imposition of a European rule of law. However and more importantly, Kurtz epitomises the failure of self-restraint in such lawless settings, while Lingard never faces Kurtz's dilemma in confronting his sense of morality. Conrad portrays Lingard more positively and consistently than Kurtz as an embodiment of colonial benevolent paternalism. After all, "[h]is trade brought prosperity to the young state, and the fear of his heavy hand secured its internal peace for many years" (Conrad, 1975, p. 167). To those who would criticise the colonial endeavour he would retort, "[y]ou know nothing about it. I would do it again."[4]

In *An Outcast of the Islands* Conrad's description of the Malay landscape is redolent of natural decadence and corruption, metaphorically foreshadowing Willems' moral and material downfall. What could be more emblematic of this corrupting influence than Aïssa whose Eastern feminine power over Willems accentuates the rot that emanates from the natural landscape itself?[5] The thematic ideas in Conrad's description of Malay landscape produce and signify a world that could only lead to the destruction of any European who trespasses across the nature/culture boundary. And the foreshadowing of Willems' inevitable fate can be more or less determined by his "drinking the muddy water out of the hollow of his hand" (Conrad, 1975, p. 66) denoting the flawed decision he made to pursue his love for and attraction to Aïssa.

The theme of cultural and moral contamination is not restricted to novels with Eastern settings only. It resonates in other Victorian literature set in then contemporary Britain itself. As Kathleen Spencer (1992, p. 1203) notes, the urban Gothic and romance revival during the nineteenth century

[3]This connotation of law as a part of a cultural discourse marking the boundary between culture and nature is discussed by David Delaney. While Delaney's analysis is restricted to the notion of nature in its geographical and social construction, his argument is also significant in decoding European construction of Others as part of the culture/nature dichotomy. As he explains "*Nature* is a category marked off from other categories. So are *wilderness*, *animal*, *body*, *human* and *mind*. It matters where the lines are drawn. It matters which reasons are advanced as justification for drawing the line in one place rather than another." See David Delaney, "Making Nature/Marking Humans: Law as a Site of (Cultural) Production", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* 91 (2001), 489.

[4]Ibid. 193. This retort could be an allusion to James Brooke's response to his detractors back in England who accused him of being an unscrupulous swashbuckler victimising the indigenous people of Borneo for his own benefits. See the chapter "Trials and Tribulations" in Payne, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, 66-82.

[5]John Butcher notes that European men who kept Asian mistresses claimed that their action was due to the exotic beauty of these women and because of "the tropical climate [that] made resistance to their charms doubly difficult". See John G Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880-1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 204.

share another crucial characteristic beyond their common reliance on contemporary adventure and exoticism: a concern for purity, for the reduction of ambiguity and the preservation of boundaries.

It is this concern with racial purity and cultural boundary that shaped Victorian Eurocentric ideology as reflected in its literature and laws governing the interaction between the English and their Others. In *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, for example, Heathcliff is described as a "dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman" (Brontë, 2008, p. 3). His implacable hatred of his enemies and destructive passion for Catherine serve as catalysts that poison the social stability of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Only his death could cleanse the air and bring stability to nineteenth-century social idealism. Similarly in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason has to be imprisoned in Thornfield Hall due to her Caribbean cultural Otherness that is deemed corrosive to the stability of the idealism of nineteenth-century English morality. Her death serves the purpose of eradicating any lingering possibility of contamination. What is interesting however in *An Outcast of the Islands* is how Conrad employs death as the preserver of racial and cultural purity by claiming the life of Willems instead of Aïssa (although this can be explained by the respective settings of the fictions). Plots differ, but the outcome remains the same: European racial purity remains intact.

The passage from nature to culture, as I have explained, is embedded in Western discourse as an explanation of the idea of the linearity of history. This is especially true during the nineteenth century when anthropology became a branch of science explaining the social development of humans. The distinction between nature and culture in nineteenth-century anthropology has always been used to identify the essential difference between animal and human. Being closer to nature constitutes the understanding that a people lacks the mental power to organise itself in a civilised manner as far as structuring cohesive political and social aspects of community are concerned. Nature means giving away reason for impulses and passions of the heart.

Conrad's portrayal of Aïssa resonates with the view of the Eastern woman as being closer to nature and farther away from culture. Being a female Other she is alluring and mysterious, diabolical and devious. In *An Outcast of the Islands* Aïssa is the most prominent Oriental woman. She is the suffering daughter of Omar el-Badavi, an Arab pirate, and a Malay mother[6] who watches her family members perish one by one fighting the colonial powers. She, with her blind father and his loyal follower Babalatchi, barely escape being handed over to the Dutch by the Sultan of Sulu. In the discussion below, I will explain how Conrad's narrational explanation of the encounter between Aïssa and Willems helps define Conrad's idea of the Oriental woman.

As we have stated, in *An Outcast of the Islands* the love between Willems and Aïssa is not a love story in the traditional European sense. It is a love bound to end tragically due to the incompatibility of their skin colours. A love story of racial divide ending happily would violate European ideas of racial purity. Only death or estrangement could end such a story. The most salient themes of the story are the issue of European morality and how the female Other would destabilise the sense of its higher moral pedestal. For a European man to fall in love with a female Other is to descend into an abyss of moral degeneration. As we have explained a female Other was always viewed as a *femme fatale* who was seductively exotic and erotic and morally destructive to a European man. The outer appearance of passivity could be deceiving as she possesses the lethality only a female Other could have. In this Malay fiction Aïssa is portrayed as the stock Eastern *femme fatale*. Conrad portrays Willems' relationship with her as the source of the corrosion of his morality and sense of civility who seductively draws Willems nearer to his destruction.

In *An Outcast of the Islands*, however, Aïssa does not intentionally try to bring destruction to Willems. Her being a female Other is enough to bring the plot of the story to such a conclusion. Although after their first meeting it is Willems who is attracted to Aïssa and who wishes to capture her heart, in subsequent narration by Conrad there is ambiguity as to the role of the hunter and hunted. For her part, Conrad makes it plain that Aïssa's attraction to Willems is due to what, and not who he is. Like Mrs. Almayer, who adores Lingard for his martial prowess, Aïssa believes Willems

[6]I have decided to include Aïssa as an indigenous Malay woman although she is Arab/Malay in ancestry to align her with Conrad's own portrayal of Aïssa as the Malay woman in consonance with the tropical setting and not with a notion of a Middle Eastern woman. In this sense, Aïssa is a representation of the Malay woman in the Malay jungle who "carries with her the sinister enchantment and vitality of the [tropical] jungle." For further discussion on Conrad's native girls see Inniss, "Conrad's Native Girl: Some Social Questions", 40.

comes from a "victorious race." But to her he is also a "dangerous thing" (Conrad, 1975, p. 68). Nevertheless, for Aïssa, Willems still has his weaknesses. As such he can also be "a terror vanquished, surmounted and made a plaything of" and finally "ready to be enslaved" (Ibid). While Willems thinks that he is planning the "gradual taming of that woman by the words of his love" (ibid, p. 69) unbeknown to him it is Aïssa who sets out to entrap his heart. Conrad explains that "[s]he felt that he was ready. She felt it with the unerring intuition of a primitive woman confronted by a simple impulse" (Ibid, p. 68). It is an impulse to dominate and control. Aïssa then allows Willems to seduce her, to make him feel that she is frightened of him in their early encounters.

Therefore, when Aïssa is absent it is Willems, the supposed hunter, who feels the torment of loneliness. As Conrad narrates:

> in the sudden darkness of her going he would be left weak and helpless, as though despoiled violently of all that was himself. He who had lived all his life with no preoccupation but that of his own career, contemptuously indifferent to all feminine influence, full of scorn for men that would submit to it, if ever so little; he, so strong, so superior even in his errors, realized at last that his very individuality was snatched from within himself by the hand of a woman (Conrad, 1975, pp. 69-70).

This passage explains Aïssa as the predator and Willems as prey. Willems realises that his perceived inner strength against all feminine seduction (which, of course, is understood in European cultural terms) crumbles upon his encounter with Aïssa.

What we wish to highlight here, however, is that Conrad's depiction of Willems' emotional entrapment by Aïssa suggests a process of attraction that is metaphorically presented as psychical violence. This psychical violence implies a reluctance on the part of Willems to succumb to such temptations, only to be overwhelmed nevertheless. The formulation that Willems' "individuality was snatched from within himself" contextualises this episode within the narrative of the seductive and degenerative potential of the female Other. It is the same "individuality" that Willems, in conversation with Lingard, explains Aïssa "took away ... which I had to get back" (Conrad, 1975, p. 221). This theme of psychical violence is enforced by the metaphors and phrases used to describe their relationship. "Horror", "fear", "slippery prisoner", "terror", "precipice" and "inevitable destruction" are words and phrases Conrad uses to describe Willems' feelings. Eventually, the language used serves to foreshadow the inevitably tragic ending of their love.

Faced with both the power of Aïssa's attraction and repulsion Willems laments:

> He, a white man whose worst fault till then had been a little want of judgement and too much confidence in the rectitude of his kind! That woman was a complete savage ... He seemed to be surrendering to a wild creature the unstained purity of his life, of his race, of his civilisation. He had a notion of being lost amongst shapeless things that were dangerous and ghastly. He struggled with the sense of certain defeat - losing his footing - fell back into the darkness (Conrad, 1975, pp. 72-73).

In the description above Willems both desires and fears Aïssa because of her Oriental allure. But eventually he is repulsed by her unscrupulous cruelty in attempting to dominate him by spurring him to kill Almayer and Lingard with the intention of totally severing his ties to his Europeanness. His fear is also accentuated by her determination to possess him at all costs, even to the extent of injuring her own father. As Willems admits to Lingard, "[s]he would have stuck at nothing to defend her own. And when I think it was me – me – Willems ... I hate her" (Conrad, 1975, pp. 221-222). He indicates her willingness to even hurt her own father to protect her lover.

Additionally, Conrad projects Willems' lust for Aïssa as counter to rationality. As Willems proclaims to Lingard, "I must have been mad. I was mad. Every time I look at her I remember my madness" (Conrad, 1975, p. 225). Furthermore, the impact of Aïssa's love for Willems transforms him into a "ghost" (Ibid, p. 78) and "a masquerading spectre" (Ibid, p. 79) whose physical appearance speaks of mental suffering. In this description of Willems' transformation Aïssa is compared to a disease that sucks the masculine vitality out of Willems. In his conversation with Almayer, Willems explains that:

> [a]t first . my life was like the vision of heaven - or hell; I don't know which. Since she went I know what perdition means; what darkness is. I know what it is to be torn to pieces alive (Conrad, 1975, p.80).

In trying to understand the torment that befalls Willems the reader will be left to wonder over the destructive impact of the female Other's love on a European who considers his human fallibility to be "the weakness of genius" (Ibid, p. 19). More importantly, what is the ideology that shapes Conrad's portrayal of Aïssa who could produce such devastating love? How does the affection turn into a loveless nightmare? There are no clear indications in the text as to the real causes of Willems' torment besides his being in love with Aïssa and her urging him to kill Almayer and Lingard.

To understand this situation we posit that Willems' sense of utter helplessness can only be understood by laying the foundation of our analysis on the civilised/savage and moral/immoral dichotomies. When Willems falls in love with Aïssa he feels that he has fallen from the world of the civilised into the world of the savages. It is true that Aïssa has repeatedly cajoled Willems to "strike at his own people so that he could be mine" (Ibid, p. 207). But in Conrad's novels set in Malaya violence, even against one's own kind, is not a particular moral dilemma as far as Europeans are concerned. Lingard periodically employs violence to protect his commercial interests and the Dutch authority is ready to eliminate any potential threats to its hegemony by the use of force as the Dain Maroola episode in *Almayer's Folly* testifies. Thus the cause of Willems' psychological trauma can be found in his belief that he has degenerated by falling in love with the savage Aïssa and can find no avenue for escaping her dangerously obstinate passion and passionately animalistic love. When he implores Lingard to take him away from the settlement he exclaims that Aïssa is "an animal," (Ibid, p. 221) "a devil" (Ibid, p. 221) and "a sin" (Ibid, 223). At this juncture of the story Aïssa is Willems' greatest nightmare he wishes to escape from.

In analysing the plot of *An Outcast of the Islands* and its themes, we as readers are faced with an interpretative dilemma in weighing the ideologies of author and characters as they interweave in the story. One of the defining characteristics of Conrad's narrative strategy is his employment of irony as a literary device to distance himself as the author from the ideology of his characters. Wolfreys, and Womack (2002, p. 49) refer to this method as structural irony, a device which allows a writer to "establish an ironic layer of meaning throughout the text, often by virtue of the ironic distance provided by the narration of a literary work." Thus, a reader needs to be mindful in interpreting the meanings encoded in the utterance and thoughts of characters to avoid misinterpreting them as being representative of the views of the author.

Conrad, as a chronicler of the gap between the moral rhetoric and deeds of empire, stands as an exemplar of the structural ironist. His texts reveal the counter-currents of intention and reality and the contradictions between thought and material acts. These are major themes of his colonial texts. The reader, however, has to be able to differentiate between the author's ideology and the ideologies of his or her characters. In *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* especially, the reader needs to understand the separate beliefs and values of characters and author because what a character says, does or thinks might not represent the author's beliefs or values. When Willems, for example, senses that he is "surrendering to a wild creature the unstained purity of his life, of his race, of his civilization" (Conrad, 1975, p. 72); how do we as readers make sense of this statement? First of all, this statement is loaded with inferences and presumptions about Self and Other. That he as a white and civilised man could fall in love with a semi-savage is incomprehensible to him. His act of "surrendering" to Aïssa negates the common practice of European domination over other cultures. And unsurprisingly Willems feels "lost amongst shapeless things that were dangerous and ghastly," (Ibid) denoting a world that he presumes is lacking a guiding morality and laws that define his Self as civilised.

However, questions remain as to whose voice it is that encapsulates these Self/Other negations into a thought. Is it the inner voice of Willems only as a character in the text or does the author share the same view? At this juncture we posit that the views and assumptions revealed by Willems belong to him alone. In other words when Willems thinks that he is cultured and racially pure the inner voice belongs to him as a character. It is a literary device referred to as narrative interior monologue where the author presents "the thoughts of the character exactly as he is alleged to have thought them" (Gibbons, 1979, p. 34). These views and assumptions of the character are not necessarily

shared with the author. This is how structural irony as a narrative device works. However, there are other ways for the ideology of the author to surface in a text through narrative cracks and crevices.

All texts express views and values. My contention is that once authors put pen to paper they are articulating their points of view about certain issues. Writers choose issues to address and develop narrative strategies to explore them. As Helen Parr explains:

> [w]riters make choices about the issues, ideas and situations they explore and about how these are represented in the text. What is selected, what is given emphasis and what is omitted (or taken for granted) are very important (Parr, 2000, p. 38).

These issues have to be articulated somehow, singly or in combination, through theme, imagery and characterisation. And as Parr indirectly points out, there are omissions and silences that tell another story about an author's ideology. By comparing, synthesising and analysing the many voices of the characters present in his text a reader can gauge the general thematic and ideological directions of an author's narrative. Another method of textual dissection is to study the recurring images, motifs and symbolism present in the novel. These images and motifs serve to foreground the overall views and values of the author concerning certain issues. For example, the sombreness and deception of the Malay world could be interpreted as a metaphor of the female Other.

For the purpose of our argument we will examine these ideological cracks and slips of the author by analysing the confrontation between Willems and Lingard that occurs towards the end of the novel. This episode represents a climactic moment of the novel as it creates the highest tension of the story before Conrad resolves the many complications that have been building up prior to the showdown between protégé and mentor. We will show how Conrad's ideological distance from his various characters in *An Outcast of the Islands* reveals his Eurocentric ideology.

We contend that Conrad shares a varying degree of ideological similarity with his characters. For example, Almayer and Willems can be said to stand further away from his ideological stance as they represent his notion of the fallibility of empire and the emptiness of claims of European civilisation. As such they are portrayed unflatteringly as selfish and obsessed in their superiority complexes while oblivious of their own moral shortcomings. Lingard, on the other hand, is closer to Conrad's own ideology and thus is presented more favorably. Conrad portrays Lingard as honest and beneficent; he is just, but can also be harsh when circumstance requires it. He is generally free-spirited, without the pretence of being cultured like other European characters, although his main motivation of dominating trade can be construed as equally selfish. Nevertheless, he is closer to Conrad's view of a chivalrous European than Almayer, Willems, Hudig or any other European characters in the Malay world by being steadfast to his principles where "[w]hite supremacy generally implied the domination of the white male as the supreme evolutionary exemplar of civilisation" (Keegan, 2001, p. 461). Saving the future Mrs. Almayer and sending her to the convent to learn the civilised way of life is a kind, though misguided gesture of generosity. Conrad understands this. Even Aïssa notes of Lingard that "even while you fought, your ears were open to the voice of children and women" (Conrad, 1975, p. 202). Hence, Lingard is a truer representation of an Anglo-Saxon adventurer who possesses a civilised sense of manliness without losing his humanity and civility. Our argument is that since Lingard is the most morally favourable character in Conrad's Malay fiction his actions and thoughts could give us some indications of Conrad's ideology as an author with regard to his perception of Aïssa.

The confrontation between Willems and Lingard revolves around Willems' "sin" of betraying the river to Abdulla to the detriment of Lingard's trading interests that he refers to as "part of my life" (Conrad, 1975, p. 224). But, as Willems confides to Lingard, it is not "what I have done that torments me. It is the why. It's the madness that drove me to it" (Ibid, p. 221). Willems is attempting to shift moral responsibility for his actions and moral ruin to Aïssa. Willems then goes on to explain how Aïssa metaphorically confines him under her watchful eyes, when he exclaims, "[t]he eyes of a savage; of a damned mongrel, half-Arab, half-Malay. They hurt me! I am white!" (Ibid, p. 222). Willems further claims that Aïssa is the cause of his predicament, sense of loss, and transformation from being "a civilized European, and clever" (Ibid, p. 221) into what Lingard refers to as "a something without a body ... that must be hidden" (Ibid, p. 226). Willems' lengthy rambling over Aïssa's role in his misfortune is interesting as it shows Conrad's preoccupation with the idea of the

savage female and her detrimental effect on the morality of any European man who has a relationship with her. In fact the confrontation is singly the deepest analysis of the female Other, albeit voiced through a character. While we may interpret Willems' claims and beliefs as representative of the character, Lingard's thoughts and actions and the recurring images and motifs representing the Malay world could reveal the author's ideology vis-à-vis the female Other.

The confrontation between Willems and Lingard can be viewed as partly a confession of a European seeking redemption from a sin from a fatherly figure in the form of Lingard. (After all Lingard addresses the old woman sentry as "daughter" (Ibid, p. 226) implying his power and status in the Malay world.) It is a secular version of the religious confession but with Lingard as the high priest of reconciliation. As such, Willems feels that Lingard is the only person who can save him from further degeneration by taking him out of the settlement, as he feels "[h]ate is better than being alone! Death is better" (Ibid, p. 224). For Willems, to be hated and to face death in the civilised society of Europeans is better than being in his present predicament with a woman he no longer loves and certainly fears.

However, what is significant for the purpose of this analysis is Lingard's apparent silence about Willems' accusation of Aïssa. While Willems vehemently blames his degeneration on Aïssa, "Lingard listened, fascinated and amazed like a child listening to a fairy tale" (Ibid, p. 221). For all that Willems has told him about Aïssa's role in his moral degeneration Lingard does not chastise Willems as the person responsible for his own misconduct as a civilised and clever European in control of his own destiny. His silence after a lengthy explanation by Willems of Aïssa's guilt could only be construed as his acceptance of Willems' assumptions. This silence could be construed by a Victorian reader as the true historical condition of Aïssa as the female Other and the world that she inhabits. That Aïssa's exoticism could even attract the civilised and clever Willems only to destroy him correlates with the Eurocentric ideology concerning the female Other.

Lingard's silence on this matter is one of Conrad's ideological slips, revealing such beliefs, for in this scene silence means affirmation and belief in what is stated by others without having the need to incorporate approval of the view. If we then relate this silence to the images and motifs of the Malay world that are foregrounded in the narrative of *An Outcast of the Islands* there is a convergence of view that at the heart of this savage world lies the seeds of decadence and deception. At the centre of this world in *An Outcast of the Islands* is Aïssa, the symbol of Eastern savagery, sensuality and depravity.

Preliminary to Willems and Aïssa's conversation in their first encounter near Lakamba's stockade, Conrad warns the reader of the mysteriousness of the Malay world and of the sense of dualism that resides at its core. Later Conrad's lens gradually shifts its textual focus from the deceptive and illusory nature of the surrounding forest to an eventual transfixion on Aïssa as a symbol of that illusion itself. As Conrad describes it:

> [Willems] had been baffled, repelled, almost frightened by the intensity of that tropical life which wants the sunshine but works in gloom; which seems to be all grace of colour and form, all brilliance, all smiles, but is only the blossoming of the dead; whose mystery holds the promise of joy and beauty, yet contains nothing but poison and decay. He had been frightened by the vague perception of danger before, but now, as he looked at that life again, his eyes seemed able to pierce the fantastic veil of creepers and leaves, to look past the solid trunks, to see through the forbidding gloom – and the mystery was disclosed - enchanting, subduing, beautiful. He looked at the woman. Through the checkered light between them she appeared to him with the impalpable distinctness of a dream. The very spirit of that land of mysterious forests, standing before him like an apparition behind a transparent veil – a veil woven of sunbeams and shadows (Conrad, 1975, p. 64).

This paragraph, in actuality, serves as the background to the trajectory of the theme of humankind's ambivalence about the unknown, perennial fear and attraction. But it, inadvertently, also leads the reader to Conrad's own Eurocentric ideology of looking at the Malay woman as sinister in her unfathomably mysterious beauty as well as lethality.

It is, therefore, apt that Conrad's description of the Malay forests is coded in its dual articulation of appearance and deception. The forests are full of colour and brilliance but in actuality are only a

blossoming of the dead where promises of joy only contain poison and decay. And Aïssa, as a symbol of the mysterious East, holds the chalice that promises the liquor of sustenance but in reality contains the moral poison that leads to the destruction of a European man who dares love her.

CONCLUSION

Joseph Conrad has proven to be the most ambivalent of colonial writers. For an author writing in an era of imperialism he shows exceptional insights into the machinery of colonialism and its impacts on indigenous societies. Therefore, if we consider Conrad as a writer of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, he is a liberal humanist. And as a modernist who decries the inconsistency between the words and deeds of European colonialism he truly is an enlightened critic. In this era of imperial triumphalism Conrad is radical in articulating the fictional voices and concerns of indigenous characters. It is also unusual to have Europeans defeated by the designs and strategies of local characters.

But in our contemporary postcolonial world, Conrad's voice is merely considered a shade different from the racialist ideology prevalent during the Victorian era. While far from condemning Conrad we have shown how Eurocentric assumptions could still find their adherent even in the most enlightened of writers. Conrad's Malay novels reveal how Eurocentrism as an ideology operates in representing the reality of European colonisation of the Malay world. The most enduring image of the Malay as innately piratical also captures Conrad's imagination. This is especially evident in his Malay novels discussed above.

Conrad also holds to be true the assumptions of the Malay female Other. Therefore, Mrs. Almayer and Aïssa, as his representations of Malay women, still conform to Eurocentric notions of the savage, exotic and degenerative female Other. In the end, these Malay female characters will neither be tamed by the tender glove of European civilisation nor will they cease, in loving European men, to be the cause of their moral degeneration without redemption.

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