

## Joseph Conrad: The Question of Racism and Representation of Muslims in his Malayan Works

Masood Ashraf Raja  
*Kent State University*

Ever since Achebe's indictment of Joseph Conrad for his representation of Africa, any serious critical study of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* must first take a stance on Conrad's alleged racism. In his famous speech, Achebe challenged two aspects of *Heart of Darkness*: its representation of Africa and Africans and the canonicity of the work itself. Achebe's main point seems to be about the noxious impact of *Heart of Darkness* as a pedagogical tool about Africa, which is compounded by the canonical acceptance of the text itself. Unfortunately, however, Achebe's timely intervention has actually enhanced the very canonicity of *Heart of Darkness* that he challenged, for the debate after his intervention has mostly been focused on *Heart of Darkness*. But as is obvious from Conrad's oeuvre, *Heart of Darkness* is not his only major work about the cultures of the colonial periphery, and for Conrad to be a "thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe 255), his representation of other cultures of the colonial periphery must also be taken into account. This essay aims to complicate Achebe's indictment of Conrad, albeit symptomatically, by focusing on Conrad's two Muslim characters—Babalatchi and Abdulla—from his Malay novels. Reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in comparison with his earlier works will be helpful in refuting or, at least, complicating the charge of racism against Conrad. It is not necessary to read Conrad in such an extremely binaristic way. Maybe a wider approach to his works would help in retrieving a Conrad more nuanced and ambivalent than the absolute terms in which Achebe describes him. This comparative approach takes the discussion beyond the limited scope of *Heart of Darkness* and builds on the pro-Conrad arguments offered by scholars such as Hunt Hawkins<sup>1</sup> whose response to Achebe could be made more persuasive by taking into account Conrad's Malay fiction. Even though *Heart of Darkness* is the most canonized text of Conrad, his Malay works are not necessarily peripheral to his oeuvre. In fact, "Conrad wrote five novels and twelve short stories placed somewhere in that part of the East

---

<sup>1</sup> While I strongly agree with Hawkins's main assertions in this essay, I still think that he could have made his argument stronger if he had, just like he differentiates between different kinds of Imperialisms, posited the representation of Muslims in Conrad's Malayan works as an example of a different and better representation of non-European characters by Conrad.

which includes south-eastern Asia and the island world between it and Australia” (Clemens 460).

First, it is necessary to touch upon the main aspects of Achebe’s critique of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. In his much cited speech Achebe makes an important observation, which touches upon a very important aspect of human subjectivity: the capacity to speak. Achebe asserts:

It is not Conrad’s purpose to confer language on the ‘rudimentary souls’ of Africa. In place of speech they made ‘a violent babble of uncouth sounds.’ They ‘exchanged short grunting phrases’ even among themselves. But most of the times they were too busy with their frenzy. (255)

This very important observation makes Achebe’s charge all the more serious, for if Conrad is not a “thoroughgoing racist” (255) then why does he withhold speech from the African subjects of his story? Compared to this serious charge there is, however, a very convincing argument by Hunt Hawkins who finds Marlow “essentially sympathetic to the Africans” (296). According to Hawkins:

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow is essentially sympathetic to Africans . . . He does not view them as noble, but he finds that, in comparison with the fiendishness of Kurtz, their ‘pure, uncompromising savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine.’ He sees them as ‘prehistoric’ but he recognizes ‘their humanity—like yours.’ Marlow is sufficiently sensitive to their culture to realize that in Africa drums might have ‘as profound meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country.’ (296)

From a critical perspective these two responses from two different critics are quite convincing, and their critical legitimacy depends not only on the validity of their arguments but also on their cultural determinacy: African and American respectively. Thus while one sees Conrad only from the point of view of an African, the other cannot escape the tendency to look at Conrad from a Western liberal-humanist standpoint. If one were to look beyond this particular text to other peripheral and silenced subjects within the colonial discourse, the question of Conradian racism and imperialism can be discussed in greater depth and with more ambivalence than the dichotomous stance illustrated above. A study of Conrad’s Muslim characters is important, for no other religious group has been more grossly misunderstood and misrepresented than the Muslims, both in contemporary Western scholarship as well as within the historical context of Conrad’s fiction. In Edward Said’s words “there is a consensus on “Islam” as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world’s new political, social, and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism” (Said lv). While the negative representations of Islam have been clearly normalized in the current metropolitan politics of war on terror in a post-9/11 world, Muslims even in twelfth- and thirteenth-century European representations were also seen

as “barbaric, degenerate, tyrannical, and promiscuous” (Loomba 54). In a way, then, it can be said that perception of Islam and Muslims in the West are couched in a sort of trans-historic prejudice. I am not attempting to conflate race with religion here, but to some extent in the European representation Islam is invariably always racialized, hence bringing together the two distinct markers of colonial prejudice, race and religion. While a large corpus of critical research exists about Joseph Conrad’s stance on imperialism and racism, not many critics have dealt with the representation of Muslims in Conrad’s work, which is quite surprising since many of Conrad’s famous and important works do field an impressive array of Muslim characters. Most of Conrad’s Malayan works have Muslim characters, and it is within these characters that one can trace not just the presence of an incipient anti-colonial agency, but also a very plausible counter-discourse to the colonial dicta under various registers of honor, friendship, loyalty, and economy. The presence of these Muslim characters, however, does not absolve Conrad of his peculiar latent and manifest racism, but it does help complicate the absolutist stance that Achebe takes about his work. This analysis of Conrad’s Malay works helps posit an ambivalent view of Conrad according to which Conrad can be seen “contrapuntally” (Said *Culture* 18) with reference to his own works about a different set of natives as opposed to the Africans of *Heart of Darkness*, which allows us to retrieve a Conrad who is, and can be, imperialist and anti-imperialist, racist, and non-racist at the same time.

Conrad’s Muslim characters are neither incidental, nor ancillary to his narrative. Being one of the most important signifiers of nineteenth-century Malayan proto-nationalism<sup>2</sup>, Islam is very important in constructing a modern Malay identity. According to William Roff “The Malays were, and are, Sunni Muslims of the Shaf’i school” but their version of Islam was “much influenced by local tradition” (7). Hence the *ulama*, the religious scholars, were “generally tolerant of magic, not least because its functionaries sprang from the same village milieu and shared the same basic beliefs in the nature of the physical universe” (Roff 7-8). Therefore, historically, in case of both colonial and present day Malaya (Malaysia), Islam does not only serve as a major religion but is also considered an important signifier of Malay identity. Robert Hampson in his book *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad’s Malay Fiction* juxtaposes the classic and modern definitions of a Malayan as following:

Turnbull<sup>3</sup> begins her *Short History* by asserting that the ‘Malays’ are of ‘mixed ethnic background’: some having lived in the peninsula . . . for more than a millennium, others migrating in more recent times from Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi and other Indonesian islands, but they have accepted the Malay language, have assimilated to

---

<sup>2</sup> The term proto-nationalism is derived from E. J Hobsbawm, who considers proto-nationalist tendencies—ethnicity, religion etc.—as important constituent elements of modern nationalism.. For details see Hobsbawm 46-79.

<sup>3</sup> C. Mary Turnbull, *A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1981).

similar customs and subscribe to the *Muslim faith* [my emphasis].’ This resembles the modern constitutional definition of Malay, which involves speaking Malay, subscribing to Islam and identifying oneself as Malay. (13)

It is obvious that being a Malay Muslim—both in the past and present—is nothing incidental, but, rather, an integral part of constituting a Malay national identity. There is, however, yet another distinction to be made while dealing with Conrad’s Muslim characters: Conrad posits the native Muslims and the Arab Muslim traders as distinctly separate entities brought together because of their religious affinities and their collusion against the Western colonizers and traders. Thus, while the native characters—Babalatchi for example—form alliances with the Arabs to safeguard the local interests of autonomy, the Arabs collude with the natives to gain advantages from the local rulers against their Western trading competitors. In either case, Conrad’s Muslim characters cannot be treated as incidental or anomalous, but should rather be taken as the norm. Conrad did not include these Muslim characters in his fiction as exotic appendages, but rather as a necessity, for their elision would have silenced the most important proto-national group of Malay political reality.

Babalatchi is one of the native Muslim characters who figures prominently in three of Conrad’s major Malay novels.<sup>4</sup> From the few sources outside the text about the conception of this character, it is quite evident that Conrad had created Babalatchi as one of the two major contenders in his work that was provisionally titled “Two Vagabonds,” but was eventually published under the title *An Outcast of the Islands*. Conrad wrote to Marguerite Poradowska in one of his letters written in 1894:

I have begun to write, but only the day before yesterday . . . I am calling it “Two Vagabonds,” and I want to sketch in broad outline, without shading or detail, two human wrecks such as one meets in the forsaken corners of the world. A white man and a Malay. You see that I can’t get away from Malays. I am devoted to Borneo. What bothers me the most is that my figures are so real. I know them so well that they fetter my imagination. The white man is a friend of Almayer; the Malay is our old friend Babalatchi before he arrived at the estate of Prime Minister and confidential adviser to the Rajah. (Gee and Strum 77)

Thus, even during the plenary phase of the prequel to *Almayer’s Folly*, Babalatchi was not just an ancillary character but rather one of the two “vagabonds” in the novel, making him as important as the main white character, Willems. Within its historical context, of course, *Outcast* is a story about Willems. In fact, a critical look at the preface to the *Outcast* is enough to clearly understand that the work *was* prompted by a real-life

---

<sup>4</sup> The three novels are called the Lingard trilogy and include *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), *An Outcast of Islands* (1896) and *The Rescue* (1920). As is obvious, the three novels are linked through the experiences of the central character, Captain Lingard. A good discussion of Conrad’s narrative technique and other stylistic choices in writing the trilogy can be found in Heliéna Krenn’s work on the subject.

character whose “dependent position, his strange, dubious status of a mistrusted, disliked, worn-out European” (*Outcast* xlv) became an inspiration for Conrad to include him in his novel. For the representation of the native Muslims, it is important to trace the degree of agency exercised by both these vagabonds: Willems and Babalatchi. In my reading of the texts it becomes quite evident that Babalatchi is a relatively more complex character and he displays more wisdom, tenacity, and strategic insight than his European counterpart. It is this degree of agency accorded to Babalatchi that suggests that Conrad’s treatment of native Muslims is much more complicated than to be simplified under a reductive binary of native versus the European. The critics, nonetheless, still tend to see Babalatchi as a foil to Willems but that can only be done if Babalatchi’s agency is put under a complete and unneeded erasure. John Lester suggests the following about Conrad’s Muslim characters: “One role of the Muslims then is to indicate European failings by their bigoted yet, in reality, perspective accusations. In their other comments and deeds they reflect, in exaggerated form, the shortcomings of their Christian counterparts.” (51)

The above reading is quite justified but tends to reduce Conrad’s representation to a binary structure of European vs. the native. However, if studied under the economy of native agency, the representation of Muslim characters becomes more complex. Babalatchi of the Lingard trilogy is a native Malayan Muslim. According to Norman Sherry: “It is known from the bills of landing [of the *Vidar*] preserved at Yale that there was a trader called Babalatchi in Dongala . . . there can be no doubt that Conrad met this trader” (165). Sherry also suggests that Babalatchi is rather a compound character<sup>5</sup> involving the real-life Babalatchi and another native mentioned in “Sherard Osborn’s *My Journal in Malayan Waters*” (166). What is important to note about this construction of Babalatchi’s character is the degree of thought involved on the part of Conrad to create such a character, which in itself suggests that Conrad was trying to present him in the best and most realistic way, a practice he could have easily avoided if he was just pandering an exotic native stereotype to his European audience.

The next important thing to note is the very multidimensionality of Babalatchi. He is a native with a mission, and his sense of mission clearly derives from his hatred and distrust of the white dominance. But he is no fanatic warrior: he is, rather, a master tactician and strategist, and he knows the strengths and weaknesses of his enemy. Surely this kind of deeper knowledge of the enemy which Conrad attributes to him could have not been a part of his consciousness if Conrad were to represent him as an essentialized, demonized native inherently opposed to the superior white narrative. A brief analysis of Babalatchi’s grievances against the

---

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed account of various historical sources for Babalatchi’s character check Norman Sherry’s *Conrad’s Eastern World* 165-170.

Europeans and his later course of action would be beneficial to this discussion.

Surely, Babalatchi can also be read as a representation of the devious, cowardly, and treacherous native, especially since during all stages of his interactions with the Europeans he goes out of his way to show his subservience. But it is the degree of agency and forethought displayed in his actions that redeems Babalatchi for a more complex reading. While *Almayer's Folly*—the first of the trilogy—culminates in the final outcome of Babalatchi's grand design, the *Outcast* can be seen as the primary groundwork for Babalatchi's plan for the white man's failure. It becomes quite obvious during the course of the second novel that Babalatchi is driven by an almost obsessive sense of purpose. This obsession clearly stems from his existential experiences and not from a so-called primitive hatred for the outsiders, for Conrad posits it as a consequence of his experiences with the white man. Babalatchi seems to display both personal and political grievances against the white man. Babalatchi's personal views about the Europeans are very clear: "They are very strong. When we fight with them we can only die. Yet . . . some of us still live! Some of us still live" (*Outcast* 52). It seems quite obvious that Babalatchi clearly understands the strength of his opponents—he has fought them and suffered terrible losses, but he has not given up. The last part of his declaration above—some of us still live—is quite an ominous account of his personal resolve, and it plays a major role in his future undertakings. As nothing hasty could be done against the European trade monopoly and Lingard's alliance with the local Rajah Patalolo, Babalatchi ponders over the following plan:

What was wanted was an alliance; somebody to set up against the white man's influence—and somebody who, while favorable to Lakamba, would at the same time be a person of good standing with the Dutch authorities . . . . A white trader would not do. A white man would not fall in with their ideas—would not be trust worthy . . . . Such a man might be found amongst the Arab traders. (57)

There are a few very interesting things to note in the above passage. It seems that Babalatchi possesses a brilliant sense of political awareness, which in itself suggests that Conrad, after all, was not as bigoted as one might be led to believe. Under an economic register, Babalatchi clearly understands that one reason the Dutch have so much influence over their Rajah and hence on the people of Sambir is because of their monopoly on trade, for it was "Lingard's jealousy" that "kept all the traders out of the river" (*Outcast* 57). By recognizing the damaging influence on the trade and political autonomy of Sambir, Babalatchi displays an insight which would have not been made available to some stock character, but Conrad does give him such agency, creating a character who is opposed to the white masters and who also understands the very strategic basis of their power—guns and a trade monopoly. Babalatchi is aware, through his personal experience against the Europeans, that he cannot fight them;

hence he must strike at the most vital interests of the white man. This leads him to his first objective: disrupting the trade monopoly. He could have sought an alliance with another European, but that is not a viable option, for none of the Europeans are “trustworthy.” Here, by granting Babalatchi the capacity to think strategically about a Malay-Arab alliance, Conrad displays a much better understanding<sup>6</sup> of Malay affinity toward Arab traders than one would expect from a purely Eurocentric, “thoroughgoing racist,” for historically such alliances did exist. While tracing the influences of non-Malay groups in Malay Peninsula between 1699-1819 Leonard and Watson Andaya suggest:

Another influential group were the Arabs, particularly those from the Hadramaut. They traded extensively in the archipelago where they were granted special commercial privileges because they were of the same race as the prophet. Towards the end of the century a part-Arab Sayid Ali, even became ruler of Siak. Europeans viewed Arab influence with concern, and in 1750 a Dutch Governor of Melaka complained at the extent to which they had penetrated Malay society. He would probably have agreed with a later comment by Francis Light that the Arabs were ‘unwilling to yield to any authority . . . good friends and very dangerous enemies. (93-94)

Now a brief comparison of the above passage and Babalatchi’s analysis of the situation cited prior to that gives a brilliant account of Conrad’s understanding of the subtleties of Malay-Arab relationships. I must point out that the mere similarity of the historical account and Conrad’s fictionalized account is in itself suggestive of the amount of research—if not deeper understanding—Conrad must have done in order to present his native characters within their socio-political milieu. By granting Babalatchi the agency to think and act strategically, Conrad clearly becomes a writer much more ambivalent than someone who can be reduced in simple Manichean dichotomies of racist and non-racist categorization. The fact that Babalatchi wants a non-white, Arab ally displays two important aspects of Babalatchi’s personal—and thus by extension Conrad’s—understanding of the situation. Babalatchi knows through his personal experience with Omar el Badavi and through his larger cultural heritage that the Arab traders are not only likely to be a good counterpoint to the whites, but also that they would be more trustworthy. Thus, Babalatchi while displaying a great understanding of his cultural history and its interactions with the Arabs, also seems to be aware of the trustworthiness of the Arabs as traders as well as fellow Muslims.

A brief resume of Arab involvement within the affairs of historical Malaya would be important to trace here. Historically, Southeast Asia, in

---

<sup>6</sup> I am not suggesting here that a better understanding of the natives made the colonizers more friendly to the natives. In fact, as Edward Said proved in his works, the knowledge of the native customs and lands underwrote the colonial process. What I am suggesting here is that Conrad’s representation is based on better knowledge of the native customs and does not depend purely on the cultural stereotypes of the natives.

the words of K. G. Tregonning, is “the only great expansion of Islam that was peaceful” (28) and Conrad seems to have clearly understood this important aspect of Malayan Islam. Exactly where and how he must have learned this is a matter of pure speculation, but his texts do prove that he knew about this important historical distinction, for his characters clearly tend to display this understanding through their individual actions and through their interactions with their Arab supporters. The Malay-Arab trade relationship has a long history and even though the early Muslim traders were Arabs, the eventual trade, and the spread of Islam, was caused by the Muslim traders from India. Here is how another historian accounts for the history of this encounter between the natives and Arab traders:

By the ninth century Arab traders knew a large part of Southeast Asia but appeared to have neglected this area in favor of lucrative China trade . . . there is no hint of organized Arab trade with these areas [Maleka straits, Johor etc.] until the mid century. This period provides the only clue of a Moslem [sic] trading colony in a place called Kalah, located tentatively in the northern part of Malay Peninsula. As one might expect, isolated evidence of this Moslem contact is scattered through the western archipelago . . . However, the first accepted evidence of local Moslem activity is Marco Polo’s account of 1292, which mentions that the town Perlak in northern Sumatra was Moslem. (Watson and Leonard Andaya 52)

Thus, even though Conrad totally elides the Indian Islamic influence over Malaya—the major influence—his inclusion of Arabs as traders competing against the Western traders is clearly based on a much better understanding of the Malaya history that cannot just be attributed to a mere purveyor of the exotic. Also, by granting Babalatchi the clear insight to forge an alliance with the Arab traders against the monopolizing Westerns, Conrad seems to tap into the native affinity toward Arabs—of good character—which had clearly existed historically in the hearts of the native converts to Islam, and which is shown clearly through Babalatchi’s reverence for Omar, whom he saves during a fight against the whites, and Abdulla whom he calls, besides other things, the “protector of the oppressed” (*Outcast* 116).

Having established the importance of Babalatchi’s personal and political grievances against the white traders and Conrad’s fair enough understanding of these cultural and political values of the natives, I will now turn to the other (non-native) Muslim character, namely Syed Abdulla bin Selim. While tracing Conrad’s real-life sources, Norman Sherry suggests the following about Abdulla:

The Arabs who traded at Berau [Conrad’s Sambir] were all Jooffrees, owners of the *Vidar*. According to the *Singapore and Straits Directory*, Syed Mohsin Bin Salleh Al Jooffree was already owner of several steamers in 1883 and had branch houses at Berau and Bulungan. He had four sons and it was the eldest, Syed Abdullah, who traded at Berau. (107)

Hence, like most of his European characters, Syed Abdulla is also derived from a historical figure whom Conrad must have known, especially since he joined the *Vidar* “on 22 August 1887 and left on 4 January 1888—a period of four and a half months” (Sherry 29). There are a few important things to note before undertaking to analyze the alliance between Babalatchi and Syed Abdulla: Babalatchi’s personal/political designs, his hatred for the white traders, and his reverence for Abdulla not just as a trader but also as a sayed. Conrad seems to have understood this relationship under all these complex registers and he represents it as such. Thus, against the superior power of the Western monopoly traders, the character and resources of the Arab traders collude with the native trust of the Arabs over the “infidel” whites to overthrow the white supremacy and replace it with a Muslim-to-Muslim trade alliance. Here is how Conrad introduces Abdulla:

For upward of forty years Abdulla had walked in the way of his Lord. . . . Very soon his ability, his will—strong to obstinacy—his wisdom beyond his years, caused him to be recognized as the head of a family whose members and connections were found in every part of those seas. . . . He bore himself with humility becoming a Believer, who never forgets, even for one moment of his waking life, that he is the servant of the Most High. He was largely charitable because the charitable man is the friend of Allah, and when he walked out of his house—built of stone, just outside the town of Penang—on his way to his godowns in the port, he had often to snatch his hand away sharply from under the lips of men of his race and creed; and often he had to murmur deprecating words, or even to rebuke with severity those who attempted to touch his knees with their finger-tips in gratitude or supplication. (*Outcast* 109-110)

This is an interesting description of a rich Sayed Arab trader. It cannot just be read as something that stemmed merely out of Conrad’s imagination, a liberty we should not take for until now all the characters discussed in this paper do seem to have some real-life prototype. I think Conrad understood quite a lot about Islam, especially about the kind of Islam practiced by the native Malays and the Arabs. According to John Lester “a more potent source for Conrad’s knowledge of Islam seems to have been Sir Richard Burton’s *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah*” (44). I do agree with this assertion, but I also think that coupled with this documentary knowledge, Conrad must have also picked up quite a lot from his interaction with the Muslims during his stay in the Southeast Asia. The above-cited passage clearly supports my assumption. Note that Conrad names his character Sayed Abdulla, and this name is of paramount importance not just in deciphering the rest of the passage but also in gauging Conrad’s degree of understanding about Islam. Now a Sayed (also spelt Sayyid) is traditionally someone who claims his descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. Traditionally, within the Indian Subcontinent, Islam was spread by the mystic saints almost all of whom were sayyids. Similarly, according to some Malay historians “Sufism was the vehicle by which Islam became the religion of the archipelago”

(Andaya and Andaya 52). The Malay relation to Islam, therefore, is that of a mystical nature in which a Sayyid would be held in high esteem. What must also be remembered is that Conrad is writing in the wake of the Wahabi<sup>7</sup> movement, which by 1803 “had succeeded in capturing Mecca, and the wider Muslim community reverberated to their call for purification of faith and return to Koran’s basic teaching” (Andaya and Andaya 119). Thus, by the time Conrad is writing his Malay fiction, the Malay Islam was already coming into contact with the “ideas of purified [Wahabi] Islam” (Milner 12). Kissing the hands of a sayyid was a common practice, and still is to some extent, in the Muslim India (also present Pakistan) for non-Wahabi’s who followed the mystical strains of Islam. Thus, when people try to kiss Abdulla’s “hand” or try to touch his “knees” in “gratitude and supplication,” it is not merely an exoticized representation of a foreign culture. In fact, this part of the above quoted passage clearly states that Conrad did know about this practice of obeisance at least within its Malay context. Furthermore, Abdulla’s attempts at stopping the native Muslim from such gestures can be clearly placed within his own Wahabi tradition, according to which such a gesture would be completely unacceptable. What I am trying to suggest here is that this passage should not be read as a mere exoticized description of a Muslim Arab character—there is too much implicit textual evidence within its language to merely consider it a fluke, or worse a mere result of Conrad’s imagination of the exotic. Hence, I find it safe to suggest here that in describing Abdulla, Conrad displays a much deeper understanding of the Muslim culture than has hitherto been attributed to him.

Conrad makes it clear that the “wish to get the best of him [Lingard] in every way, became Abdulla’s mania, the paramount interest of his life, the salt of his existence” (*Outcast* 111). It is within this context that Abdulla responds to Babalatchi’s repeated requests. Thus, the native and a powerful Arab trader are united against a common enemy under the larger cause of the believers against the so-called infidels. Historically, would such an alliance be possible? I think such an alliance would be very practicable and even a cursory view of the Islamic history is enough to support this particular assumption. In fact, the early invasion of India in 712 C.E by the Abbasid Caliphate was prompted because the trade routes of India had become unsafe for the Arab merchant vessels. Thus by allowing such an alliance between the Muslim natives and Arab traders, Conrad is clearly suggesting something that could have actually happened, and that did happen historically.

Abdulla’s representation cannot, therefore, be read as an exoticized account of an Arab trader, for the representation is based on knowledge much deeper than that of a surface representation. By and large Abdulla is represented as a very efficient, charismatic, and ruthless trader—

---

<sup>7</sup> See John Lester, 47. Here Lester links Conrad’s knowledge of the Padris (Malay version of the Wahabi movement) references to which were found in the manuscript of Conrad’s *The Rescue*.

especially ruthless towards his white competitors—who, in the end, is able to bankrupt the inept Almayer, and outflank the brave but despotic Lingard. Granted that a Babalatchi-Abdulla alliance is garbed in terms of treachery, and that is how most early critics seemed to have read it, but to me it reads more like a political struggle in which the native—Babalatchi—comes up with a viable strategy to defeat the white traders against whom, he already knows, a frontal assault would not be successful.

There is yet another place in the text of *Outcast* that at least one critic has misread and then blamed Conrad for an error of representation. Commenting about Abdulla's discomfort over Aissa's marriage to Willems, John Lester writes:

Marriage with Christians is actually permitted by the Qur'an but since Willems is already married, Abdulla is condoning adultery, which is proscribed by both Islam and Christianity. But it is the fact that Willems is an outsider that troubles Abdulla most. (55)

The above passage sounds quite convincing, but there is nothing in the text, especially at the time Abdulla encounters Willems, to suggest that Abdulla knew of his earlier marriage. What troubles Abdulla the most is the marriage of a Muslim woman to a Christian. While Muslim men are allowed to marry Christian and Jewish women, the Muslim women do not have the same rights in the *Sharia*. Abdulla's distaste for compromising an important Islamic law can only be understood under this particular aspect of the *Sharia*. It seems that here, too, Conrad understood the particularities of Muslim tradition better than his critics.

By far the most important part of my inquiry about Conrad's representation of Muslims is the last passage of *Almayer's Folly*. By the time one reaches this passage, one has presumably read the two prequels that Conrad wrote to finish this reverse trilogy. It is evident at the end of the trilogy that the project started by Babalatchi and Abdulla has finally matured into what they both had foreseen and planned: Babalatchi has been able to install Lakamba as the local Raja, the Europeans have been driven out of the local trade and the last reminder of their utter failure, Almayer, has died a lonely death. The native-Arab alliance has succeeded in reducing the powerful outsiders, thus establishing a new local order exactly as they had planned it. The success of this project, in itself, spread over three novels can be read as one of the most interesting and convincing stories of native agency against the dictates of the colonial powers. There is no doubt that the rajah of Sambir would have to maintain cordial relations with the Dutch overlords, but within the political arena of Sambir itself, his success is complete—the white competitors have been literally wiped out, not by brute force but through a superior strategy of attrition. The ending of *Almayer's Folly*, I suggest, should be read as the unfolding of a new beginning, a new order that would ultimately end in

total freedom of the natives. Conrad ends the novel with the following lines, conveyed through the words of Abdulla:

And as they passed through the crowd that fell back before them, the beads in Abdulla's hands clicked, while in a solemn whisper he breathed out piously the name of Allah! The Merciful! The Compassionate! (AF 143)

Most critics have failed to see the true importance of this ending. Conrad clearly knew the contextual usage of this phrase. As pointed out by Hans van Marle:

More than quarter of a century later, in a letter to his cousin Aniela Zagorska on the draft of her Polish translation of *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad made it clear that he was much aware of the significance of this 'well-known formula' as a recitation of 'the attributes of Allah' Rightly so, since the words are part of the *Bismillah*, the exordium of all the *suras* of the Koran but the ninth. (137)

It seems that Conrad was aware of the formulaic usage of the exordium. Traditionally, all Muslims invoke *Bismillah* at the beginning of all their religious as well as secular projects. The whole exordium (*Bismilla hirrahman-i-raheem*) means, in the name of Allah, the most merciful, the most compassionate. Hence, what Conrad posits as the end of a project, can also be read as a new beginning, for after the white traders have been eliminated—both figuratively and literally—there can now be the beginning of a new order, an order accomplished by the natives against their white competitors.

Having discussed Conrad's treatment and representation of two of his major characters within the Lingard trilogy, it becomes easier to deal with the question of his racism and anti-imperialism. This brief essay has attempted to problematize the very notion of a clear delineation of Conrad as an artist: he rather comes out as an author who understood his native Muslim subjects and, at least within the Lingard trilogy, the natives end up accomplishing their planned goal of defeating the white contenders. Hence, I suggest, Conrad should neither be read as the so-called "thoroughgoing racist" of the *Heart of Darkness* or as a "a remarkable man" (Marle139), but rather as an ambivalent writer of his times who, at times, was able to go beyond the realm of the cultural stereotype and colonial prejudice.

#### Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text backgrounds and Sources Criticism*, Third edition. Robert Kimbrough, ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 1988.
- Andaya, Barbra Watson and Leonard Y. Andaya. *A History of Malaysia*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982.
- Clemens, Florence. "Joseph Conrad as a Geographer." *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (1940): 460-465.

- Conrad, Joseph. *Almayer's Folly*. 1895. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996.
- . *An Outcast of the Islands*. 1896. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Gee, John A. and Paul J. Strum, Eds. *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska 1890-1920*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940.
- Hampson, Robert. *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction*. New York: PALGRAVE, 2000.
- Hawkins, Hunt. "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*." *PMLA*, Vol.94, No. 2, (1979): 286-299.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Krenn, Heliéna. *Conrad's Lingard Trilogy: Empire, Race, and Women in the Malay Novels*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1990.
- Lester, John. *Conrad and Religion*. London: The Macmillan Press, 1988.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Marle, Hans, van. "Conrad and Richard Burton on Islam." *Conradiana*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, (1985): 137-140.
- Milner, A. C. *KERAJAAN: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1982.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- . *Covering Islam*. New York: Vintage, 1997.
- Roff, William R. *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.
- Sherry, Norman. *Conrad's Eastern World*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1966.
- Tregonning, K. G. *A History of Modern Malaya*. London: Eastern University Press, 1964.