The Postcolonial Space in Joseph Conrad: A Consideration of Two Early Novels

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Summary

That Conrad continues to exert considerable influence on postcolonial discourse is unreservedly acknowledged today. Positing the notion of a "postcolonial space", this article proposes to explore the problematic of racial, cultural and sexual identity in Conrad's first two novels, *Almayer's Folly: A Story of an Eastern River* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), treated dismissively by early critics of Conrad's work. The concept of a postcolonial space functions on at least three levels in this project. Firstly, it denotes the literal and metaphoric odyssey of the author who writes back from the periphery to the centre, deconstructing empire in the process of representation. Secondly, it acts as a "space-clearing gesture" (Appiah), or theoretical space to interrogate Conrad in the light of some of the most pertinent concerns of modern literary discourse, namely, issues of racial, ethnic and gender subjectivity. Lastly, it postulates an indeterminate, interstitial "third space" (Homi Bhabha) of intervention between the overdetermined formulations of the East/West binary, and the traditional humanistic readings of the writer's work inaugurated by F.R. Leavis in 1948.

Opsomming

Dat Conrad se invloed op postkoloniale redevoering steeds voortgaan, word sonder twyfel erken. Deur die idee van 'n "postkoloniale ruimte" voort te bring, ondersoek hierdie artikel die probleem van ras, kulturele en seksuele identiteit in Conrad se eerste twee romans, *Almayer's Folly: A Story of an Eastern River* (1895) en *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), wat deur vroeë kritici van Conrad se werk gering geskat is. Die konsep van 'n postkoloniale ruimte funksioneer op ten minste drie vlakke in hierdie projek. Eerstens wys dit op die letterlike en metaforiese reis van die outeur wat skryf vanaf die grense na die kern en daardeur die ryk dekonstrueer in die representasieproses. Tweedens tree dit op as 'n "ruimte opruimingsgebaar" (Appiah), of teoretiese spasie om Conrad te ondersoek in die lig van sommige van die mees pertinente vraagstukke van moderne literêre debat, naamlik die onderliggende kwessies oor ras, etnisiteit en geslag. Laastens dui dit op 'n vae, tussen-in "derde spasie" (Homi Bhabha) of ingryping tussen die oordrywende formulasies van die Oos/Wes skeur, en die tradisionele humanistiese vertolking van die skrywer se werk, wat begin is deur F.R. Leavis in 1948.

> To intervene in the present means, then, to interrupt the performance of the present, by exploiting the in-between spaces. I understand this space, as a liminal space ... [that] is, a transitory space, a space other, a third space that is not here/there, but both. This third space implies the inscription and possibility of voices which until now have been silenced or remained underground [.]
>
> (De Toro 1999: 20)

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.
>
> (Bhabha 1994: 1-2)

> Usually the stereotype is a sad affair, since it is constituted by a necrosis of language, a prosthesis brought in to fill a hole in writing. Yet at the same time it cannot but occasion a huge burst of laughter: it takes itself seriously, believes itself to be closer to the truth because [it is] indifferent to its nature as language. It is at once corny and solemn.
>
> (Barthes 1977: 199)

According to the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre ([1974]1991: 1-3), the notions of space and time were traditionally the provenance of mathematics and science, therefore, to speak of social or mental space would have been anachronistic. The thinking of Descartes in the sixteenth century is viewed as the critical point from which the notion of space moved from a mathematical, sensory construct, to a mental and social one. With the advent of Cartesian logic, which came to include both the Subject and the Object (I think, therefore I am), space came to dominate all senses and all bodies. Hence the modern field of enquiry known as epistemology has inherited and adopted the notion that the status of space is that of a mental thing or mental place. Lefebvre has posited the "problematic" of space – a term borrowed from philosophy – as comprised of questions about mental and social space, about their interconnections, about their links with nature on the one hand and with pure forms on the other (p. 413). Lefebvre has distinguished between the "problematic of space", an abstract concept, and "spatial practice" which is observed and analysed on a wide range of levels such as architecture, city planning or urbanism. This essay seeks to problematise and extend the notion of mental and social space in a consideration of Conrad's two early novels, *Almayer's Folly*: *A Story of an Eastern River* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896). Specifically, it sets out to examine the issues of racial, cultural and gender subjectivity which

energise the reading of this author who died almost eighty years ago. What warrant can there be for us in the twenty-first century to consider a dead white Eurocentric male, whom Chinua Achebe, famously if not notoriously, labelled a "thoroughgoing racist" in 1975 (Achebe 1988: 257) and a "bloody racist" in 1977 (Achebe 1990: 124)? The remit for such a study comes from the theoretic space of postcolonialism, which is traversed by the language of postmodernism and poststructuralism.

As a discursive term, "postcoloniality" (with or without the hyphen) remains an embattled signifier as most introductions to postcolonial readers testify. Although Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is usually acknowledged to be the foundation text in the domain of postcolonial studies, the term is not indexed in this publication nor in his subsequent works, *The World, The Text and the Critic* (1983) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). The term "post-colonial", as a less politically loaded alternative to "Third World Studies", made its first significant impact in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) by Australian scholars Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin. An early use of the term "postcoloniality" as a conceptual, discursive apparatus is by Stephen Slemon:

> [For] me the concept proves most useful not when it is used synonymously with a post-independence historical period in once-colonized nations but rather when it locates a specifically anti- or *post*-colonial *discursive* purchase in culture, one which begins in the moment that colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others and which continues as an often occulted tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations.
>
> (Slemon 1991: 3)

Gradually, the concept "postcoloniality" began to appear as a key term in titles of books as instanced in the publications by Williams & Chrisman (1993); Barker, Hulme & Iversen (1994); Moore-Gilbert, Stanton & Maley (1997); and Chrisman & Parry (2000), and several others. Despite the proliferation of texts on postcoloniality, there has been no end to the debates between protagonists and antagonists on the theoretical viability of the concept. Notable amongst the detractors have been Kwame Anthony Appiah, Arif Dirlik, Aijaz Ahmad and Anne McClintock. In an oft-quoted essay first published in 1991, Appiah has said, "Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery" (Appiah quoted in Mongia 1997: 62). Dirlik's sardonic remark, which he has himself described as "partially facetious", is that postcolonialism begins when "Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe" (Mongia 1997: 294). Ahmad (1995: 1-20), in

a deprecatory gesture aimed specifically at postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha and Spivak, insists that the term was never used originally in the context of literature but politics, to refer to the postcolonial nation state. Arguably, the most trenchant and sustained critique of the term "postcolonial" has been by Anne McClintock. In an earlier essay (McClintock in Barker, Hulme & Iversen 1994: 253-266), she faults the term for prematurely celebrating a postcolonial condition that has not materialised and which fails to take cognisance of the dynamics of power in globalised politics. The "ubiquity" of the term "postcoloniality", she avers, is due to its academic "marketability". In a subsequent publication she argues that postcoloniality is a trope of sequential linear progress which rehearses the Enlightenment trope of linearity (McClintock 1995: 10). Ashcroft's response to McClintock's criticism of linearity is: "This seems to be a ghost which refuses to be exorcised. Undoubtedly, the "post" in "post-colonialism" (Ashcroft retains the hyphen) must always contend with the spectre of linearity and the kind of teleological development it sets out to dismantle" (Ashcroft 2001: 11). He contends that the radical instability of the meaning of the term gives it a vibrancy, energy and plasticity which have become part of its strength, as post-colonial analysis rises to engage issues which have been out of the purview of metropolitan theory. Despite these conflictual positions, the term post-coloniality has nudged its way into Jeremy Hawthorn's 1998 edition of *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory,* where it receives considerable space. Concluding the entry, Hawthorn writes, "[The] term has created institutional space for the study of a wide variety of non-Canonical literatures, and has given academics (and, let us admit it, publishers) a focus for the development of new areas of study" (Hawthorn 1998: 266).

At a time when the question of postcoloniality as a mode of critical intervention was a vexed one in Western academia, in South Africa Leon de Kock argued that the agglomeration of various approaches in the "post" mode runs the risk of a dehistoricised, monolith of essentialised knowledge (De Kock 1993: 1993: 44-69). Despite this caveat, he concludes that inasmuch as the term can be critically disabling, it does provide the space for "other" people to tell their own stories about themselves (p. 64). The notion of a "postcolonial space" in this article derives from Homi K. Bhabha who has coined the term "postmodern space" as a mode of intervention into cultural identification, in the "negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, opening out, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race" (Bhabha 1994: 219). Transposed to a study of Joseph Conrad's early novels, the construct of a postcolonial critical space articulates on several nodes. It anchors, firstly, the temporal and geographical spatiality of Conrad in relation to our own time and space, speaking to us from Europe more than a century after the publication of

his major works. Secondly, it suggests the geographic and metaphoric odyssey of the writer and his protagonists, who position themselves on the periphery of empire in remote, exotic locales, only to disrupt the gaze of the metropolis by interrogating some of its assumptions. Thirdly, it functions as a "space-clearing" gesture, as Appiah has described it (Appiah in Mongia 1997: 63). In other words, it provides a contemporary nexus for an exploration of Conrad in the context of some of the most pertinent concerns of the early twenty-first century, such as race, gender and identity. Finally, as I have inflected the term, a postcolonial space denotes an indeterminate, psychological space in which subjectivities are in a state of flux as suggested by Stuart Hall (1993: 392-403).

A brief overview of significant Conradian criticism on the writer's early works might help to contextualise this paper. Henry Louis Gates asserts that in much of canonical literature race has been an invisible quantity (Gates 1986: 2). The growth of canonical literatures was coterminous with the prominence of the New Criticism and Practical Criticism of the early twentieth century. Gates problematises the relationship between race, which he regards as the trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, and the aesthetics of New Critical thought as follows:

> How did the pronounced concern for the language of the text, which defined the Practical Criticism and New Criticism movements, affect this category called race in the reading of literature? Race, along with all sorts of other "unseemly" or "untowards" notions about the composition of the literary work of art, was bracketed or suspended. Within these theories of literature to which we are all heir, texts were considered canonical insofar as they elevated the cultural; .... One not heir to these traditions was, by definition, of another race.
>
> (Gates 1986: 3-4)

It would be interesting, if not instructive, to see what Leavis has to say about Conrad's two early novels, remembering that it was he who placed Conrad in the great tradition of English literature. In fewer than ten lines he dismisses both these novels, with generalisations such as "excessively adjectival studies in the Malayan exotic" (Leavis [1948]1962: 218). Not a word is mentioned about the relationship of the protagonists across racial and cultural divides. Albert Guerard, whose work is a labour of love, devotes considerable space to the early novels but it is soon manifest that his reading sanctions the methodology of New Criticism in its preoccupation with form, technique and artistic integrity, which are the touchstones of Leavisean criticism. Like Leavis before him, Guerard also comments on the adjectival texture of the first novel, alluding to the "Malayan scene with its intuitions into the savage mind, the struggle of Almayer and his native wife for the mind of their half-caste daughter" (Guerard 1958: 72). Regarding Conrad's second novel and its

protagonists, he dismisses the passion of Willems and Aïssa as "corrupt", leading to "sexual failure" (p. 80). Guerard has been echoed by subsequent Conradians such as Frederick R. Karl and Leo Gurko. Karl speaks of Willems's passion for the "native seductress" which leaves him "cut off from civilization and civilized feeling" (Karl 1960: 101). What Karl means by civilisation and "civilized feeling" is left to conjecture. Gurko introduces the trope of nature against which Willems is corrupted and experiences his "fall" (p. 59). Daniel R. Schwarz's study of 1980 is important for the space he accords to Conrad's early works. Whilst Schwarz departs from the late Victorian notion of the Fabians, Shaw, Cunningham and Butler that Western civilisation was of a superior quality to the more primitive kinds of human life, he cannot break entirely free from the legacy of his predecessors as revealed by some of his curious comments on the subject of interracial sex. His judgement of Willems is that "he unwillingly surrenders to savagery and moral darkness after he is revealed as an embezzler" (Schwarz 1980: 9). This crude equation of interracial sex with moral failure not only vitiates some of his superb criticism of Conrad's early novels but also perpetuates the binarisms of nature/culture and savagery/civilisation which permeate colonial discourse. Ian Watt's monumental study, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1980), projects the male characters as hapless victims of seductive native women who are regarded as appendages: "In this void, Willems succumbs to a beautiful Malay girl Aïssa" who "finally shoots him" (Watt 1980: 73). Such a dramatic statement belies the plot of the novel in which Aïssa shoots her lover under tragic circumstances. Recent scholarship has attempted in various degrees to restore a sense of balance to previous Conradian criticism. One such example is Robert Hampson's study which focuses strongly on the women protagonists but from the perspective of the principal male character. In Hampson's discussion, Willems still emerges as a victim, but not a victim of his passion or a seductress but his "ontological insecurity" (Hampson 1992: 66).

If the discourses of early Conradian critics have perpetuated the notion of a rational Western intellect in conflict with an Eastern stereotype of the passionate, savage native, as embodied in the relationships of Almayer and Willems with the native women of the East, then reading Conrad "contrapuntally" (to borrow a term from Said [1993]1994: 59) from a postcolonial/-postmodern space would revitalise the lost sense of agency and authority of the half-castes and natives in his Eastern world.

Chinua Achebe's counter-reading of Conrad almost thirty years ago inaugurated an antithetical space from which Conrad has been interrogated by a postcolonial critique which writes back to the empire. Adopting Achebe's critical perspective, several scholars, including Padmini Mongia (2001), have articulated position papers which view Conrad as an unmitigated racist and sexist. If Leavis et al. represent one theoretical space, which is the canonical

one, and if Achebe et al. represent an antithetical space of contestation, then a more profitable endeavour would be to mediate Conrad from a third space, a liminal space of contingency and contiguity. Homi Bhabha, in his *Location of Culture* (1994), which constitutes his poetics of postcoloniality, postulates a "third space" of liminality in an attempt to reinsert space as a critical dimension in literary and cultural discourse. According to Bhabha, the "post" in terms such as postmodernity, postcoloniality and postfeminism, are meaningless if they are merely signifiers of sequentiality (Bhabha 1994: 4). The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological limits of ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, dissident histories and voices – of women, the colonised, minority groups, and the bearers of policed sexualities (pp. 4-5). By positing the notion of the "post" as a "third space", a liminal space of contingency, Bhabha is dissolving the binaries of us and them and creating a space "where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides*, *in-between* where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present" (Bhabha 1994: 219). In this interstitial, liminal, third space, the constructs of hybridity and ambivalence play a crucial role in Bhabha's theorisation of postcoloniality and the postmodern condition. As he predicates early in *Location of Culture*, "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (p. 4).

Ruth L. Nadelhaft's contrapuntal reading of Conrad would fall into this third space of interrogation. Her feminist readings, begun in the early 1980s, provide a hermeneutic space for the polyphonic voices of the marginalised in Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*. According to her:

> In these two books, the complex relationship between men and women, designed to confirm the identity of men, results instead in limiting the effect of white power, in revealing the liberating potential of native vitality, and in projecting the doom of male European colonialism .... Nina in *Almayer's Folly* and Aïssa in *An Outcast of the Islands* are tautly imagined and described, full-fledged characterizations complete with all the ambiguity of Conrad's traditionally ambiguous men.
>
> (Nadelhaft 1986: 152)

Nadelhaft also points to the creation of character doubles, a technique Conrad uses for his psychologically split male characters in his later works. Character doubles serve to personify in their own lives the possible alternatives misunderstood by the protagonists. Thus, Nina and Aïssa embody the personal,

moral and political possibilities of the male protagonist. Whilst Leavis and his acolytes replicate the view of the lush exotic East as sensual, seductive and corrupting, Nadelhaft's reading goes against the grain. The issue for her is the imposition of Western culture, embodied in the characters of men like Almayer, Willems and their surrogate father, Tom Lingard, on the natural world of the Far East. Her position is that the culture/nature split is to be understood as patriarchy struggling to master and to impose its form upon the natural, female world (Nadelhaft 1991: 9). David Spurr (1993: 183) has proposed the term "eroticization" to describe the discourse by which the non-Western world stands for sexual debasement and death as well as sexual adventure. Nadelhaft disrupts the paradigm in which the men, who represent Western patriarchal culture, associate themselves with civilisation and rationality, and the women, who are either half-castes like Nina or natives like Mrs Almayer and Aïssa, are associated with nature which is both seductive to the Western mind as well as unpredictable and uncontrollable.

The issues of race, gender and sexuality, imbricated in the economy of colonial power, provide the intertextual core of the first two Malay novels of Conrad. Robert J.C. Young (1995: 181) maintains that nineteenth-century theories of race did not just consist of essentialising differentiations between self and the other, but they were also about a fascination with people transgressing societal taboos such as incest and miscegenation. But this was not simply a matter of sexual or cultural encounter, but reflected the forms of sexual exchange which were the mirrors and consequences of the modes of exchange of property. The history of the meanings of the word "commerce" includes the exchange of merchandise as well as bodies in marital and sexual relationships. Romantic and Victorian fiction, such as in the novels of Jane Austen, is replete with examples of young men and women seeking to make their fortune in marriages of convenience. On the subject of "colonial desire", Young concludes:

> It was therefore wholly appropriate that sexual exchange, and its miscegenated product which captures the violent, antagonistic power relations of sexual and cultural diffusion, should become the dominant paradigm through which the passionate economic and political trafficking of colonialism was conceived. Perhaps this begins to explain why our own forms of racism remain so intimately bound up with sexuality and desire.
>
> (Young 1995: 182)

Nowhere in Conrad is this colonial paradigm of economic, political and human trafficking more vividly illustrated than in the opening paragraphs of *Almayer's Folly*. Woken abruptly from his reverie and summoned to dinner by the shrill voice of his detested Malay wife, Almayer ponders his wasted life in

a loveless marriage of convenience and in the pursuit of fabulous wealth:

> Almayer's thoughts were often busy with gold; gold he had failed to secure; gold the others had secured – dishonestly, of course – or gold he meant to secure yet, through his own honest exertions, for himself and Nina. He absorbed himself in his dream of wealth and power away from the coast where he had dwelt for so many years, forgetting the bitterness of toil and strife in the vision of a great and splendid reward. They would live in Europe, he and his daughter. They would be rich and respected. Nobody would think of her mixed blood in the presence of her great beauty and of his immense wealth.
>
> (Conrad [1895]1947: 3)

Almayer's reflection announces the central concerns of the novel: the pursuit of money and power regardless of the means to attain them, and the dynamics of racial and cultural encounter. His daughter Nina is the miscegenated product of his marriage to the young Malay girl, the only surviving member of a family of pirates killed in a skirmish with Tom Lingard, the archetype of the colonial adventurer. In his misplaced benevolence, Lingard offered Almayer a bribe to marry the girl after he had her educated at a convent school for four years. When making the proposition to Almayer, Lingard tells him: "And don't you kick because you're white!... None of that with me! Nobody will see the colour of your wife's skin. The dollars are too thick for that, I tell you! And mind you, they will be thicker yet before I die" (Conrad [1985]1947: 10).

There can be no mistaking the authorial intention to expose the soiled underbelly of colonial adventurism and the crass motives of its representatives such as Lingard and Almayer, a point that is lost on some postcolonial and feminist critics who, à la Achebe, are preoccupied with Conrad's alleged racism and negative portrayal of native women. This is not to turn a blind eye to the racist allusions in the novel, of which there are many. It is to register the omniscient gaze of the narrator, who opens up to scrutiny the inherent prejudices of the coloniser and the colonised alike. Accepting the promised bribe, Almayer reflects: "As to the other side of the picture – the companionship for life of a Malay girl, that legacy of a boatful of pirates – there was only within him a confused consciousness of shame that he a white man – still, a convent education of four years – and then she may mercifully die. He was always lucky, and money is powerful! Go through it. Why not?" (Conrad [1985]1947: 10). That Almayer has not put aside the thought of murdering his wife at a later stage is ignored by those critics who have made the facile observation that Mrs Almayer (who, incidentally, is not given a name) chews betel nut and descends into savagery. The fact that Lingard and Almayer alienate the child Nina from her is also ignored. Despised by her husband and treated as a low-priced commodity rather than a wife, Mrs Almayer lives alone

in a house built for her. But she is far from the stereotypical, passive native woman. When she thinks Almayer is hiding from her the source of Lingard's gold, she rebounds upon him: "'You know, Kaspar, I am your wife! your own Christian wife after your own Blanda law!' For she knew that this was the bitterest thing of all; the greatest regret of his life" (p. 40). This splitting and double-voicing in the character of Mrs Almayer constitutes an excoriating commentary on the attempt of Tom Lingard, the patriarchal figure in both early novels, to civilise her by making her submit to Christianity and Dutch law. Both mother and daughter in *Almayer's Folly* challenge the dominant male protagonist and his putative Western superiority and culture. When Nina returns to her estranged father and mother from a Protestant school in Singapore where she was slighted because of her race, she aligns herself with her mother's people, seeing very little difference between the culture of her father and her mother.

> Nina saw only the same manifestations of love and hate and of sordid greed chasing the uncertain dollar in all its multifarious and vanishing shapes. To her resolute nature, however, after all these years, the savage and uncompromising sincerity of purpose shown by her Malay kinsmen seemed at least preferable to the sleek hypocrisy, to the polite disguises, to the virtuous pretences of such white people as she had had the misfortune to come into contact with.
>
> (Conrad [1895]1947: 43)

When she finally decides on a future life with the Malay prince, Dain Moroola, she is confronted by Almayer. Her response to him is,

> "Can I not live my own life as you have lived yours?... Between you and my mother there never was any love ... for was I not part of that woman? Of her who was the regret and shame of your life? I had to choose – I hesitated. Why were you so blind? Did you not see me struggling before your eyes? But, when he came, all doubt disappeared, and I saw only the light of the blue and cloudless heaven".
>
> (Conrad [1895]1947: 190-191)

In marrying against her father's wishes, Nina does not dissolve her own identity or surrender her selfhood. She has been well tutored by her mother to cope with life in a new cultural environment:

> "There will be other women", she repeated firmly; "I'll tell you that because you are half white, and may forget that he is a great chief, and that such things must be. Hide your anger, and do not let him see on your face the pain that will eat your heart .... As long as he looks upon many women your power will last, but should there be one, only one with whom he seems to forget you, then .... to that

> woman, Nina, show no mercy".
>
> (Conrad [1895]1947: 153-154)

Subjected to the will of a future chief, Nina will not lose her own will-to-power, in a Nietzschean sense.

Nadelhaft says that "women characters occupy critical space in Conrad's early works" (Nadelhaft 1991: 13). In *An Outcast of the Islands* the character of Aïssa becomes the site from which powerful colonial figures such as Willems and Lingard are interrogated. Willems, the alter ego of Almayer, is the self-deluded white man who sees himself as superior to his half-caste wife, Joanna, and Aïssa, his native paramour. The opening description of him is a study in power: "He believed in his genius and in his knowledge of the world. Others should know of it also; for their own good and for his greater glory" (Conrad [1896]1949: 15). Like Almayer, he has been bribed to marry his half-caste wife, whom he despises. He has married her because Hudig, her father and Willems's employer, has offered him a house. Like Mrs Almayer, Joanna becomes a commodity of exchange in a marriage of convenience. She has her revenge when he is dismissed for theft by Hudig. Refusing to go with him, she defends her territorial integrity:

> "Oh! you great man!" she repeated slowly, glancing right and left as if meditating a sudden escape. "And you think I am going to starve with you. You are nobody now .... Do not speak to me .... I have heard what I waited for all these years. You are less than dirt, you that have wiped your feet on me. I have waited for this. I am not afraid no".
>
> (Conrad [1896]1949: 27)

Diminished by this encounter with his wife, Willems goes to Sambir where he meets the attractive Aïssa.

We are told early in the novel that Willems "prided himself upon having no colour-prejudices and no racial antipathies" (Conrad [1896]1949: 35). However, after his first encounter with Aïssa who has enslaved him with her beauty, he reflects, "He, a white man whose worst fault till then had been a little want of judgment and too much confidence in the rectitude of his kind! That woman was a complete savage ..." (p. 80). Mariana Togorvnick (1990: 21) suggests that the term "savage", along with terms such as "tribal" and "exotic", all take the West as norm and define the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate and subordinatable [sic]. In a subversion of the stereotypical image of the docile savage woman over whom the civilised Western man wields his power, Aïssa is given a powerful voice that even stuns Lingard into silence. When they confront each other, Lingard orders her to get out of his path. "'You ought to know that when men meet in daylight women must be

silent and abide their fate'" (Conrad [1896]1949: 245). Aïssa responds with vehemence:

> "Women!" she retorted, ... "Yes, I am a woman! Your eyes see that, O Rajah Laut, but can you see my life? I have also heard – O man of many fights – I have also heard the voice of firearms; ... I also saw men fall dead around me without a cry of fear and of mourning; ... I have faced the heartless sea, held on my lap the heads of those who died raving from thirst, and from their cold hands took the paddle and worked so that those with me did not know that one man more was dead. I did all this. What more have you done? That was my life. What has been yours?"
>
> (Conrad [1896]1949: 245-246)

Just before Aïssa fires the gun in the climactic scene at the end of the novel, the atmosphere is charged with hate: "Hate filled the world, filled the space between them – the hate of race, the hate of hopeless diversity, the hate of blood; the hate against the man born in the land of lies and evil from which nothing but misfortune comes to those who are not white" (Conrad [1896]1949: 359). Guerard has suggested that Willems's sexual passion which is strong enough to conquer racial pride leads to sexual failure (Guerard 1958: 80). Neither is the case. Willems, like Almayer, cannot transcend his misbegotten racial pride and arrogance, and his failure is not a sexual failure, attributed to Conrad's Freudian fear of sex, but a failure of communication across racial and cultural boundaries. To use the language of Homi Bhabha, Willems's failure is the inability "to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities" (Bhabha 1994: 1). He has always perceived Aïssa as the Other: "She, a savage, I, a civilized European, and clever! She that knew no more than a wild animal!" (Conrad [1896]1949: 269).

John McClure reminds us that if "Conrad challenges the European representation of Malays as uniformly savage and inferior, he does not do so in order to replace that representation with an idyllic one" (McClure 1985: 158). Conrad spares neither Europeans nor the natives in his scrutiny of humankind. Not all natives are portrayed as submissive. When the Malay buccaneer Babalatchi plans to use Willems in his plot to destroy Lingard's influence, he confides to his protector Lakamba:

> "I know the white men, ... In many lands have I seen them; always the slaves of their desires, always ready to give up their strength and their reason into the hands of some woman .... [T]hey who worship many gods are thrown into the world with smooth foreheads .... Let one white man destroy another".
>
> (Conrad [1896]1949: 60)

If Achebe has criticised Conrad for not giving a voice to the natives in Africa,

Conrad's early narratives give voluble expression to agency and authority in the natives who plot and scheme against colonials and one another.

Speaking from the site of postcoloniality, Stuart Hall has provided us with some valuable insights into identity or subject formation. Hall posits that identity is an unstable category. We cannot speak for long of one experience or one identity. "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall 1993: 394). The failure, and deaths, of Almayer and Willems result from their inflexible notions of who they are. They see themselves as Europeans first and as human beings after. In contrast, Nina and Aïssa wrestle with their identities, setting themselves apart from the stereotypical attitudes prevalent in their cultural milieu. In negotiating their identity from a position of strength, in relation to the dynamics of culture and the politics of power, Nina and Aïssa transcend the conditions of their gender performativity or identities that have been rehearsed (Butler 1993: 2) in their societies since time immemorial, and construct their own selfhood.

In his 1992 study, *Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity*, Robert Hampson argued that in adopting her mother's identity, Nina betrays her father's white identity and culture. Revising this view in a later essay, Hampson argues "in the language of Homi Bhabha" that Nina finds her subjectivity not through finally choosing, or being forced to choose between her father's or mother's world, but rather as a constant performance of identity in the interstices between the different codes and traditions in which she is situated:

> In other words, rather than argue that she finally settles on a particular originary identity, I want to suggest that what we actually see in the course of the narrative is Nina's continuous performance of identity through a constant negotiation of her own hybridity.
>
> (Hampson 1998: 85)

Edward Soja, the social theorist, has endeavoured to spatialise critical thought in order to break out from the temporal prisonhouse of language (Soja 1989: 1). Using as his basic premise the spatial construct of Lefebvre, Soja foregrounds the notion of spatiality, or a geography of the mind, to open up and "recompose the territory of the historical imagination through critical spatialization" (p. 12). Apart from the work of Lefebvre which informs his theory as a whole, Soja also draws upon Foucault who proclaimed that whilst the great obsession of the nineteenth century was history, the twentieth century was the epoch of space, or an epoch of simultaneity, of juxtaposition, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed (p. 10). Soja's thesis thus calls for an appropriate interpretive balance between space, time and social being, in other words, the

creation of human geographies, the making of history, and the constitution of society. Although Homi Bhabha makes no reference to Soja whatsoever in his *Location of Culture*, his postulation of a third space of liminality chimes with Soja's attempt at reinserting space as a critical dimension in literary and cultural discourse. Bhabha's conceptualisation of a Third Space of enunciation (1994: 37) provides an alternative to the antithetical positions of us and them, centre and periphery. According to Bhabha, such an intervention

> challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. In other words, the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation ... as being written in homogenous, serial time.
>
> (Bhabha 1994: 37)

Bhabha's notion of a third space of liminality, ambivalence and hybridity in the enunciation of identity and culture has been endorsed by Shaobo Xie:

> Bhabha constructs a third space, an interstitial locus of meaning, between the indigenous and the European, the colonizer and the colonized. This newly emergent cultural space proves subversive to both the Western and the indigenous, allowing neither of them cultural and discursive continuity .... Bhabha's theory of postcolonial counterhegemony with its revisionary strategy opens up new spaces of reinscription and negotiation not only for resistance to present forms of imperialism, but for struggle against future forms of imperialism as well. Indeed, the world has witnessed many racisms and ethnocentricisms other than Eurocentric racism, although this has been the most dominant.
>
> (Xie 1997: 17)

In Bhabha's words, this "beyond theory" is a liminal form of signification that creates a space for the contingent, indeterminate articulation of social "experience" that is particularly important for envisaging emergent cultural identities (Bhabha 1994: 179). Reading Conrad from a postcolonial space of contingency and contiguity enables us in the twenty-first century to conceptualise racial and cultural differences not simply in terms of binaries or even diversity, but in terms of an "*inter*national culture" (Bhabha 1994: 38), something which Conrad, as an *inter*national writer, figured between two nationalities, was able to perceive proleptically. The author's early works, mainly those set in the Malay archipelago (including his short fiction), far from being the inchoate product of an apprentice writer, constitute an important dialectic in the negotiation of intercultural subjectivities.

When Ngugi wa Thiong'o switched his allegiance from Conrad as a role model to the Caribbean writer George Lamming, his reason was that Conrad

"wrote from the centre of the empire" whilst Lamming "wrote from the centre of those struggling against empire" (Ngugi 1993: 6). Ngugi could not have been further from the truth. Conrad and his female creations in the early novels are not prisoners of their time or space. In empowering Mrs Almayer, Nina and Aïssa, he enables them to return and disrupt the gaze of empire. Conrad, whom Mary Louise Pratt refers to as a "hyphenated white man" (Pratt 1992: 213) owing to his transcultural/transnational spatiality, lives in a liminal space, both in and beyond empire. From this exilic position he writes back to the empire, representing the other in terms congenial to the West, but at the same time deconstructing stereotypical images of the other in a disturbing way. That fixed notions of the Other were firmly entrenched in the Western psyche is borne out in the criticism of one "lady – distinguished in the world of letters" who described his tales of people from far-off countries as "decivilized" (Author's Note to *Almayer's Folly* 1947: vii). Defending his choice of subject matter in his Author's Note which was penned in 1895, after the publication of his first novel, Conrad cautions Western readers about their stereotypes of others:

> The critic and the judge seems to think that in those distant lands all joy is a yell and a war dance, all pathos is a howl and a ghastly grin of filed teeth, and that the solution to all problems is found in the barrel of a revolver or on the point of an assegai. And yet it is not so .... The picture of life, there as here, is drawn with the same elaboration of detail, coloured with the same tints. Only in the cruel serenity of the sky, under the merciless brilliance of the sun, the dazzled eye misses the delicate detail, sees only the strong outlines, while the colours, in the steady light, seem crude and without shadow. Nevertheless it is the same picture. And there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away.
>
> (Conrad [1896]1949: vii/viii)

Goonetilleke (1990: 4) has proposed that F.R. Leavis's attempt to place Conrad in the tradition of Henry James, George Eliot and Jane Austen is not quite convincing. The reason he advances is that Conrad, who was never a part of the British establishment, transcends the "Englishness" that was a benchmark of Leavis and the post-1930s literary-critical methods. Not every reader of Conrad was enamoured of the Eastern World of his early fiction which provides a vast canvas for a study of subjectivities far away from the comfort zones of metropolitan society. One unsigned American reviewer castigated Conrad for setting his novels far away from what he/she termed centres of civilisation: "[T]he accident of residence in Borneo, Celebes, and circum-ambient isles has tempted him to write novels, and has therefore made him appear a person of little discernment and poor judgment" (Sherry 1973: 80). In our new millennium, Conrad continues to occupy a critical space in postcolonial studies, albeit a controversial one. As Brenda Cooper has noted, Rushdie, Ahmad, Spivak, Achebe, Said and others, whatever their differences,

examine the world with "postcolonial eyes within the continuing Western Empire ... in which Joseph Conrad occupies prime position as still reigning Emperor" (Cooper 1996: 17-18).

If this seems to be a jarring contradiction in terms, it is an index to Conrad's ambivalent status and his location at the intersections of colonial, modernist and postcolonial discourses. As a naturalised citizen of late Victorian England, the writer often seems to adopt the register of colonial discursive practice, even to the point of supporting British imperialism as he overtly does in *Heart of Darkness*. However, the disjunction between the narratorial voice of Marlow and the authorial voice of Conrad marks the point at which the text begins its presencing of issues pertinent to postcoloniality. The anomaly between the two voices in *Heart of Darkness* is also characteristic of the early Malayan novels which appear to buy into the colonialist discourse of us and them, nature versus culture, and savagery as opposed to civilisation. The trope of the "primitive" or "savage" which Mariana Torgovnick has espoused, was the common currency in which Conrad's exotic characters were discussed. In one lengthy review of *An Outcast of the Islands*, by no less a luminary of British letters than H.G. Wells, the name of Aïssa is not even mentioned. When Wells does refer to her, she is the "savage woman" (Wells quoted in Sherry 1973: 74). As this essay has postulated, Conrad, by creating characters such as Nina, Mrs Almayer, Aïssa and Babalatchi who interrogate and subvert stereotypical representations of savages, primitives and Others in colonialist literature, finds a niche in postcolonial discursive space.

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