

The Oriental Other: Aissa in *An Outcast of the Islands*

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to offer a postcolonial reading of women in Joseph Conrad's novel *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896). Joseph Conrad is one of the outstanding writers who has dedicated his literature to depict the prospects of social interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. Most of Conrad's characters are men, whereas women appear in his novels as either random minor figures or submissive, passive creatures. In this novel, Conrad expresses his anxiety about man's loss of masculinity to a strong woman. Conrad uses native female character to prove that racism, oppression, and injustice are at the heart of imperialism. Conrad gives the female characters a voice so they may struggle in their personal life, making commentary on the practices of an imperialist, patriarchal society.

Keywords: postcolonialism, Conrad, Aissa, other, colonizer

الآخر الشرقي: عيسى في رواية منبوذ من الجزر

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الملخص

الغرض الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو تقديم قراءة ما بعد الاستعمارية للنساء في رواية جوزيف كونراد منبوذ من الجزر (١٨٩٦). يعد جوزيف كونراد أحد أعظم الكتاب فقد كرس أعماله لتصوير إمكانات التفاعل الاجتماعي بين المستعمر والمستعمّر ، وان معظم شخصياته من الذكور. أما الشخصيات النسائية في أدب كونراد القصصي هي أما شخصيات ثانوية أو مخلوقات خاضعة وسلبية. ويعبر كونراد في هاتين الروايتين عن قلقه بشأن فقدان الرجل رجولته لصالح امرأة قوية. يستخدم كونراد هنا شخصية نسائية محلية ليثبت أن العنصرية والقمع والظلم هي جزءاً لا يتجزأ عن الإمبريالية. يمنح كونراد الشخصيات النسائية هنا صوتاً حتى يتمكن من النضال في حياتهن الشخصية ، تحت وطأت ممارسات المجتمع الإمبريالي الأبوي.

الكلمات مفتاحية: ما بعد الاستعمارية ، كونراد ، عيسى ، الآخر ، المستعمر

Introduction

The descriptive meaning of the origin of ‘colonialism’ originally stemmed from ‘*colonia*’, the Roman word that lexically indicates a ‘farm’ or a certain ‘settlement’. This meaning was used to denote the Roman settlements in other lands. The meaning has come to cover the expansion of the nation’s lands to other foreign countries and territories through the strategies of forcible occupation and control by using power. This phenomenon can be traced back to the fifteenth century when it was initially used in English. Later, during the late nineteenth century, the term developed through indicating various notions. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, colonialism is defined as:

[a] settlement in a new country . . . a body of people who settle in a new locality, forcing a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up. (Cited in Loomba, 2015, p.19)

postcolonialism depicts the political and cultural conditions of colonized countries and the impact of colonizers on the culture, social, and political life of colonized people during the colonial period and after independence from the point of view of both colonizers and colonized ones. It represents an ideological response to colonialist thought, rather than simply describing a system that comes after colonialism. Politicians and historians commonly use the term “post-colonialism” to refer to the time following World War II as the period of independence. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2002), every culture has been impacted by imperialism from the time of colonization until the present. This is due to the persistent concerns that have pervaded the historical process sparked by European colonial assault (p.2). Consequently, all cultural production that interacts in some way or another with the continuing effects of colonial rule is considered post-colonial. Colonized communities engage in this process for an extended length of time through many stages and means of interaction with the colonizing power, both

during and after the real-time of direct colonial authority (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2002, p.195).

Aissa in An Outcast of The Islands

An Outcast of the Islands is the second in Conrad's Malay trilogy. The novel also shares the same Malayan setting as Conrad's first novel. It also re-asserts the issues of deception, the risk of dreaming a miraculous destiny, the tension between black and white, and the hazards of loneliness. Conrad continues to undermine the conventions of the imperial romance by presenting sympathetic and complex portrayals of native female characters who are sensuous, seductive predators of the white men whose mission is to civilize the dark continents.

Again set in the Malay, the action of the novel occurs before that of *Almayer's Folly* and focuses on Peter Willems, the central character in the novel, a thirty-year-old Dutchman who "came east fourteen years ago—a cabin boy" (Conrad, 2001, p.21). In *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad directly criticizes imperialist ideology through his representation of Sambir's setting, and his portrayal of Nina, who stands against the Western heritage. Likewise, *An Outcast of the Islands*, evinces "a direct critique of British imperialism by criticizing Lingard's rule of Sambir as paternalistic and revealing the coercive nature of even benevolent examples of imperialism" (Peters, 2013, p.204).

Like Almayer, Willems is a victim of his own delusions, but he is also a victim of Tom Lingard's misguided benevolence. Lingard's role as the father figure in *Almayer's Folly* is repeated in *An Outcast of the Islands* through his adoption of Willems. He runs away from a Dutch ship and asks Lingard to allow him to join his ship. With Lingard's help, Willems eventually rises to the position of clerk for Hudig company, then, marries him to his daughter, Joanna. He is smart and successful so his wife and her family adore him (Mugijatna, Habsari, and Kusciati 2019, 33). Willems embezzles funds from the company to pay gambling debts and slowly repays the money. Just before he finishes repaying the sum, Hudig discovers what Willems has done and fires him. Due to misconduct in Hudig & Co that is recognized by Mr. Vinck, the treasurer, his wife and her family do not respect him anymore. Willems's reputation collapses and his wife drives him out of the house, for the house is a gift

from her father. On an evening, when Willems is roaming here and there, Lingard who has already heard of his misfortune, finds him and takes him to Sambir to help Almayer (Mugijatna et al. 2019, p.33).

With Lingard's help, Willems, who has tried to commit suicide, eventually settles down in Sambir, which is also the location of Almayer's Folly. While taking a walk, Willems runs across Aissa, a Malay girl, the daughter of a former Brunei leader, Omar el Badavi and immediately becomes deeply fascinated by her beauty:

Willems stared at her, charmed with a charm that carries with it a sense of irreparable loss, tingling with that feeling which begins like a caress and ends in a blow, in that sudden hurt of a new emotion making its way into a human heart, with the brusque stirring of sleeping sensations awakening suddenly to the rush of new hopes, new fears, new desires—and to the flight of one's old self. (Conrad, 2001, p.83)

Aissa is first terrified of Willems as she becomes aware that he is one of the white males that once overcame her people. But when she sees Willems covertly on a regular basis, her anxiety transforms into the certainty of love (Fujiyama, 2013, p.73).

The novel can be read in a neat counterpoint to the central thesis of Edward Said's Orientalism. As it has been stated before in his Orientalism, Said reasons that Western representations of the Orient have acquired the status of scientific truth. For this, orientalist theory is at the core of practice and values. The result of polarizing the world into categories such as Oriental and Western is that "Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western" (Said, 1978, p.47).

According to David Theo Goldberg, "The social formation of the subject involves, in large part, thinking (of) oneself in terms of—literally as—the image projected in prevailing concepts of the discursive order. These concepts incorporate norms of behavior, rules of interaction, and principles of social organization" (Goldberg, 1993, p.193). 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 civilization. The female other, in this sense, inhabits a boundary of sexual and cultural difference. Thus, it is not surprising that

the Orientalist theme of exoticism, eroticism, and danger of Eastern women is repeated in Conrad's sketch.

In this context, orientalist images of the female other mostly revolve around the representations of Eastern sexual allure in visions of harems, or concubines. 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 colonialist ideology of the savage as representing "violence, sexual license, a lack of civility and civilization, an absence of morality or any sense of it" (Goldberg, 1993, p.202).

In the same vein, Patrick Williams, and Laura Chrisman maintain that in the process of identity constitution, more attention is paid to the nature of the Other than to that of the Self:

In this perspective, the identity formation of the West proceeds much more by listing—and denigrating—the characteristics of the Other than by explicitly enumerating those traits which make the West superior, though the negative classification of the non-Western 'them' allows the 'us' category to be silently filled with all the desirable traits which 'they' do not possess. (Patrick, and Chrisman, 1994, p.127)

However, the construction of native women in terms of recognizable roles, images, models, and labels can lie in the Oriental discourse. The terms of such construction are to be sought in the dominant modes of patriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism ideology. However, Said's work has been immensely important and has given rise to a wealth of studies of how a colonial discourse constructs the Other. Said's starting point in Orientalism is that the existence and development of every culture impel the existence of a different and inevitably competitive "other" or "alter ego" (1978, p.332). Therefore, Europe, in attempting to construct its self-image, created the East as the "Orient", as the ultimate "other". For Said, both the East and the West do not correspond to any stable reality that exists as a natural fact, but are merely products of construction in that "a construction—involves establishing

opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’. Each age and society re-creates its ‘Others’” (Said, 1978, p.332).

In Orientalism, Said also presents a contrapuntal reading of imperial discourse about the non-Western Other. For Said, controversy about the postcolonial discourse begins with the term representation. It indicates that the Western intellectual is in service of the hegemonic culture. He, further, questions how imperial and colonial hegemony is implicated in discursive and textual production. Orientalism is a critique of Western texts that have represented the East as an exotic and inferior other and constructed the Orient by a set of recurring stereotypical images and clichés. In his words, “It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries” (Said, 1978, p.57).

For Said, Orientalist treatment of femaleness was symbolic and meaningful at more than one level and extended the purely ethnographic, picturesque, or sexual interest to encompass the political, the epistemological, and the ideological. Nevertheless, the various approaches of the Orient probably share the Orientalization power which, as Said has explained, tended to work towards acquisition and domestication and, in building through the Other, the negative or antithetical image of oneself. In the case of women, the conception of Otherness is extended even further and more clearly delineated by considerations of gender and the myth attached to Oriental fecundity, femininity, and sexuality. Thus, when he discusses the ways in which the Oriental woman is represented in Flaubert’s works, he alludes to the uniform association established between the Orient and sex where he argues that “Woven through all of Flaubert’s Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex” (Said, 1978, p.189).

In her book, *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myths of Orient*, Rana Kabbani, finds wholly in favor of Said’s thesis that there exists a predetermined discourse regarding the Orient; that Western writers, inescapably subservient to that discourse, were deeply implicated in the imperialist project that Western culture was itself to some extent shaped by distorted representations of the East, the Orient, the other, the opposite, the enemy and the foil. Thus, the European writers created a series of self-

confirming stereotypical images of the East as alien, timeless, jealous, irrational, cruel, lethargic, and lascivious, designed to codify, comprehend and ultimately rule over the Orient. In Kabbani's view, these representations of women reflected a standard Victorian prejudice, namely that all women were inferior to men and that oriental women were doubly inferior, being both women and Orientals (Kabbani, 1994, p.10).

In this regard, Conrad characterizes Willems as a figure who reveals the hollowness of his self-image and the extent of his conceit. Thus, from the opening sentence of the novel, as Andrea White observes, "we know the 'he' can refer to no conventional hero" whose "fall is due to his own intrinsic hollowness, a hollowness the discourse has only begun to intimate" (White, 1993, p.137). This is clear when he describes native people with a negative discourse that reflects their inferiority and his superiority. He describes native women as "slim and yellow, big-eyed, long-haired, [and] moving languidly (Conrad, 2001, p.18)," with garbage and he also decay and considers them unclean: "They were a numerous and an unclean crowd, living in ruined bamboo houses, surrounded by neglected compounds They were a half-caste, lazy lot, and he saw them as they were—ragged, lean, unwashed" (Conrad, 2001, p.18). As a Dutchman, Willems believes he is superior to the progeny of a Portuguese government official, who, like himself, had "gone native." This colonial discourse is a discursal expression that is used ironically to denote the action of white men who had transgressed racial boundaries by marrying native women. White contends that terms such as "gone native," "gone bush" and "gone fantee" all carry derogatory connotations, indicating that such an action constituted a betrayal that threatened the "civilized" tenets of "superior" cultures (White, 1993, p.24).

Aissa, half-Arab and half-Malay is "a woman of a people despised by all" (Conrad, 2001, p.363). The simple Us and Them model of the imperial romance is thus muddied in this tale of moral delinquency. Conrad's specificity about the different groupings of native people implies a complex social order in the imperial East that is rarely if ever, found in the imperial romance. Aissa's role in the novel involves more than taking part in a parody. She is a voice for native women, and through her, Conrad comments on imperialism and its effects on their lives.

Aissa is the most prominent of Oriental woman. She is the suffering daughter of Omar el Badavi, an Arab pirate, and a Malay mother 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. Conrad's portrayal of Aissa 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. Here, Rebecca Stott keeps that "The non-European female body in imperial texts is saturated with atavistic mystery and potentiality of meaning: it is the site of the secrets of prehistoric (untamed) nature, secrets of origin, secrets withheld from the white man" (Stott, 1992, p.132).

Having Willems associates the woman with nature and the jungle, Conrad insists upon her otherness, her strangeness and mystery, and the threat she poses to racial and masculine identity. The appeal of the woman is, thus, equated with the romantic appeal of the East, the dark, the alluring, and the unfathomable, threatening a loss of the masculine self into the chaos of the jungle and the irrational female temperament. Stott outlines the perception of Aissa as the oriental female who is a part of the deadly anarchy of the natural world: "Willems, in his attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible Oriental landscape of the Malay jungle, characterizes its mystery as erotically feminine but also poisonous and deadly" (Stott, 1992, p.127).

Conrad, in this case, echoes the same theme of the *Almayer's Folly* of the destructive female. Stott notes that in Conrad's early Malay fiction, "the native women are framed and held by the jungle but also inseparable from it; they are like carnivorous jungle plants—fleur du mal—alluring and deadly" (1992, p.128). Thus, the appeal of the women is equated with that of the tropical jungle, dark, alluring, and unfathomable, making the masculine hero lose himself in the chaos of the jungle.

Aissa, the unequivocal native, carries with her the sinister enchantment and vitality of the jungle. In spite of her Arabian heritage, she is a noble savage who is totally identified with tropical nature rather than with Muslim culture. Flimsily dressed in a transparent top with a sarong wrapped loosely around the waist, and toying with a large snake, she is, as Kenneth Inniss notes, "in accord with every Westerner's image of the desirable Eastern girl from *The Arabian Nights*" (Inniss, 1970, p.39). The drawing depicts the same stereotype of Eastern female sensuality and danger that Conrad used in creating his Eastern heroines. Aissa is even more in that mold than Nina. Willems's first glimpse of her is exciting and suggestive:

As he approached her the woman tossed her head slightly back, and with a free gesture of her strong, round arm, caught up the mass of loose black hair and brought it over her shoulder and across the lower part of her face. The next moment he was passing her close, walking rigidly, like a man in a trance. (Conrad, 2001, p.82)

In his *Conrad and Masculinity*, Andrew Michael Roberts argues that in Conrad's narrative, the images of masculinity are culturally constructed, and, while Conrad represents such images, he also questions them. Working from poststructuralist theory and contemporary theories of gender, Roberts finds ties between masculinity and feminism, masculinity and imperialism. In discussing *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, Roberts investigates race and empire and their connection to masculinity. He sees desire and fear at the heart of sexual relationships, gender identity, and cultural identity. Women appear as the Other, both as gendered Other and racial Other. A woman is desirable and threatening to masculinity and the imperial male; thus, a death drive rather than a heroic accompanies the masculine encounter with the female racial other:

'white' women are on the whole conspicuously absent. European, Malay and Arab men are engaged in various forms of competition, bonding and hostility around the commercial and politics rivalries of late nineteenth-century imperialism, while women, characteristically presented as of mixed race, figure as temptation, danger, affliction and objects of desire or hope for the European males. (Roberts, 2000, p.14)

Conrad's criticism of the masculine and closed world of imperialism is most strongly exemplified in the relationship between Aissa and Willems. Conrad reveals his contempt for imperialist nations that show no interest in understanding or appreciating the culture of those people whose resources they have appropriated in order to ensure their own economic growth. Despite her hatred of imperialism, Aissa

is interested in learning about the imperialists' world: "What is that land . . . a land of lies and of evil from which nothing but misfortune ever comes to us—who are not white" (Conrad, 2001, p.157). Aissa is empathetic and strives to understand Them [The Westerns] making Willems becomes increasingly unhappy when she "in the despairing inability to understand the cause of his anger and of his repulsion; the hate of his looks; the mystery of his silence; the menace of his rare words—of those words in the speech of white people that were thrown at her with rage, with contempt, with the evident desire to hurt her" (Conrad, 2001, p.339). Here, the colonialist suspicion may meet with Said's inquiry: "Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate" (Said, 1978, p.189).

In her comment on the idea of the idealist colonizer and flawed colonized, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak holds that the imperialist ideology is always maintaining "the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (Spivak, 1985, p.251). Willems, like the imperialist powers, sees self-righteousness with his perception of Others as flawed and sharply limited. He perceives himself to be worthy of greatness but is incapable of insight and, therefore, when things go wrong, he sees himself as acted upon and, therefore, blameless: "[Aissa] did it all And when I think of all my life, of all my past, of all my future, of my intelligence, of my work, there is nothing left but she, the cause of my ruin" (Conrad, 2001, p.283). Typically, this "politics of blame" is used by colonizers to fix the responsibility for many of the present evils in the country (O'Brien, Said, and Lukacs, 1986, p.70). In this way, the colonialists take no blame for their actions and show no concern for the damage they cause. Like them, Conrad portrays Willems as a vile racist, blind to his limited abilities and flawed morality.

Aissa's look has the same magic effect to compel Willems. When she then opens wide her eyes and looked steadily at him, the enchanting looks darted at him "touched his brain and his heart together. It seemed to be something loud and stirring like a shout, silent and penetrating like an inspiration" (Conrad, 2001, p.83). Under the caress of her looks, all of Willems's senses are frozen "under the caress of that look, the uneasy wonder and the obscure fear of that apparition, crouching and creeping in turns towards the fire that was its guide, were lost— were drowned in the

quietude of all his senses, as pain is drowned in the flood of drowsy serenity that follows upon a dose of opium” (Conrad, 2001, p.160).

In Aissa’s embrace, Willems’s body is “passive” and “paralysed with dread” and robs all power “to escape, to resist, or to move” (Conrad, 2001, p.161-162). Losing the grip of reality in Aissa’s embrace, the masculine white hero becomes vulnerable to the old and blind Omar’s attack. Her gaze reduces Willems to a querulous schoolboy who pleads to his surrogate father to rescue him from her eyes: “I go to sleep, if I can, under her stare, and when I wake up I see them fixed on me and moving no more than the eyes of a corpse The eyes of a savage They hurt me! I am white! I swear to you I can’t stand this! Take me away. I am white! All white! ” (Conrad, 2001, p.280). In this context, Assia represents the site of hybridity that, according to Homi Bhabha, turns “the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory” (Bhabha, 1994, p.112).

However, Assia’s passion as destructive to Willems ignores the fact that Willems is already on the road to perdition by his own indiscretions well before he meets Aissa. Before his temptation by Aissa, Willems has been hypocritical and half-hearted both in his sense of solidarity and in his egoistic rebellion as well. He has boasted to his poolroom cronies that he owes his rise from a penniless runaway to the confidential clerk of a powerful and influential businessman to his lack of scruples: “Where there are scruples there can be no power” (Conrad, 2001, p.22). Yet he lacks the sense of superiority necessary to flout society basic demands in that he bends the law covertly rather than breaking it. Willems betrays Hudig, his boss in the company, and involves in gambling. He early feels in the sense of unbelonging. He tells Abdulla that “‘I shall never return’ . . . ‘I have done with my people. I am a man without brothers. Injustice destroys fidelity’” (Conrad, 2001, p.143).

Willems is caught up in a plan to betray Lingard’s secret. He tells himself that he is doing this for Aissa, but the action reflects his desire for freedom from all constraints: “He had given himself up. He felt proud of it” (Conrad, 2001, p.139). He betrays his benefactor Lingard, who, returning, exiles him upriver with the savage woman for whom his passion is now exhausted. He and Aissa are shunned by the natives. She still clings loyally to him, and her mute alien gaze is unbearable: “The

eyes of a savage; of a damned mongrel, half-Arab, half-Malay. They hurt me! I am white! I swear to you I can't stand this!" (Conrad 2001, 280). Robert Hampson deploys the notion of betrayal as a trope in the formation of "identity-for-self" and "identity-for-other". Tracing the pattern of betrayals in the novel, Hampson states: "Willems's betrayal is essentially self-betrayal, and only secondarily the betrayal of other loyalties, although it is through the betrayal of others that his self-betrayal is explored" (Hampson, 1992, p.32).

Conclusion

In *An Outcast of the Islands*, the oriental woman's alluring femininity and sexuality hints at a different sexual experience unobtainable in Europe and the savagery marks her difference from the civilized and cultivated white male. With his racial, gender, and cultural difference, the oriental woman becomes the white male's Other. Since a woman is a European man's primary Other, Aissa, as a native woman, fulfills a triple representation of otherness. She is unknowable as female, as non-European, and as a symbol of a mysterious landscape in which the landscape's shadowy embrace refuses to yield meaning. All are seen as hard for Western men to understand. Here, the demand of identification that is to be for an Other entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness, and only through the Oriental female Other can the white male construct and find confirmation of their identity.

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