

# Stereotyped Oriental Women in Conrad's Early Malay Novels

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**Abstract**—With help of Edward Said's theory of cultural representation of Orientalism and the method of contrapuntal reading, the paper aims to provide a study of the misrepresentation of the Oriental women by stereotypes in Joseph Conrad's two early Malay novels and expose the power relations of the West's domination and subjugation of the Orient and the Oriental women behind the stereotyping process.

**Index Terms**—early Malay novels, stereotypes, misrepresentations, contrapuntal reading

## I. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), a Polish-born English novelist, is regarded as one of the most influential writers in English literature. Conrad's literary career is greatly influenced by his peculiar drifting background. His childhood experience as a Polish exile made him sensitive to the conditions of the colonizers and the colonized in the Orient. Because of Conrad's concern about the colonial issues and his early seafaring experiences, many of his novels are set in an alien land. One key place that frequently appears as the setting in his novels is the Malay Archipelago or Borneo region. Conrad's writing of Borneo region stretches through almost his whole career. These novels include *Almayer's Folly* (1895), *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *Lord Jim* (1900) and two later works, *Victory* (1915) and *Rescue* (1920) and two short stories, *Lagoon* (1898) and *Karain* (1898). The paper deals with *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, his first two Malay novels and also his earliest two novels. *Almayer's Folly* (AF) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (OI) depict the disillusionment of the imperial dreams of the white colonialists in Sambir, the Dutch colony in Malay Archipelago and reveal pessimism about colonialism and the white empire.

With help of Edward Said's theory of cultural representation of Orientalism and the method of contrapuntal reading, the paper aims to analyze the misrepresentation of Oriental women by stereotypes in the two novels. To approach the novels from the perspective of stereotypes, the paper is helpful to understand the European textual tradition of representing the Malay Archipelago and the Malay women.

## II. THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The stereotype, as an important theoretical term in post-colonial criticism, has been discussed by Edward Said. Said studies the stereotype from the perspective of cultural representation and tries to find the Western cultural strength behind the representation. Said (1978) finds stereotyping is a key strategy of the misrepresentation (p.27). To make the Orient "being always the same, unchanging, uniform" (Said, 1978, p.98), one tendency of modern Orientalism is to classify nature and men into types. To make the giant Orient orderable and describable, a vast number of individual objects are reduced to smaller number of types, which are designated by unchanging general features for the objects. The stereotype is a deformed representation and behind it is the power relation of the West's domination and conquest of the East.

Contrapuntal reading, "with a simultaneous awareness of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (Said, 1994, p.51), interprets together discrepant Western and Eastern experiences that are "overlapped and interconnected and co-existing and interacting with each other" (Said, 1994, p.32). It tends to include what the author has forcibly excluded and suppressed and expose the Western will of domination and subjugation of the East behind the exclusion and suppression. Contrapuntal reading thus offers us a critical perspective to understand the European consciousness behind the seemingly objective Western texts about the Orient and the Oriental women.

Contrapuntal reading takes both processes of colonialism and resistance to colonialism into consideration to "draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented" (Said, 1994, p.61) in Western representations. It draws out the Oriental women's resistance to the Western misrepresentations and exposes their individuality and vitality manifested in the resistance. It enables us to observe from the Other's perspective and reconstruct the real images of the Orient and the Oriental women.

## III. ORIENTAL WOMEN STEREOTYPED AS GENDER, RACIAL AND CULTURAL OTHER

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of "fixity" in the ideological construction

of otherness. In the stereotype, which is “the discursive strategy of fixity” (Bhabha, 1994, p.66), the Other is fixed unchangeable, known and predictable. Since Flaubert’s construction of Kuchuk in his novel, with her sensuality, delicacy and mindless coarseness, the female Arabian dancer has become the prototype of Oriental women in white male writers’ representation.

The Oriental women in European writers’ representation are usually the creation of a white male fantasy. The white men project what they desire on the Oriental female and construct the stereotype of the Oriental women. Said (1978) sums up the common characteristics of the Oriental women in Western fantasy: “...they express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, above all they are willing” (p. 207). “Sensuality” and “willingness” indicate a licentious Oriental sex which is so different from the strictly-regulated Occidental sex. “Stupidity” shows the Oriental women’s barbarism and savagery, opposite to the white male’s civility and cultural ascendancy based on their racial superiority.

In *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, the beautiful Oriental women are constructed by the white male fantasy as a live embodiment of the “more libertine and less guilt ridden” (Said, 1978, p.190) Oriental sexuality to satisfy the white men’s desire for different sexual experience.

The portrait of Nina, who is a blend of European and Malayan blood, emphasizes her Oriental feminine characteristics, which mark her racial and gender otherness.

She was tall for a half-caste, with the correct profile of the father, modified and strengthened by the squareness of the lower part of the face inherited from her maternal ancestors—the Sulu pirates. Her firm mouth, with the lips slightly parted and disclosing a gleam of white teeth, put a vague suggestion of ferocity into the patient expression of her features (AF 16).

What the portrait emphasizes is Nina’s inheritance from her maternal ancestors (the main clause) and her white father’s influence (the “with” structure) is only briefly mentioned. “Gleaming teeth” and “ferocity” reveals the animal in her and her savagery.

Besides her barbarity, Nina is characterized by her libertine sexuality. In her “outward and visible sign of all she felt for the man”, Nina “threw her arms around Dain’s neck and pressed her lips to his in a long and burning kiss” (72). Nina’s forwardness confirms the Western assumption of the Oriental women’s licentiousness. Even Dain the native man is surprised and fascinated by the action. Just as Linda Dryden comments, Dain is attracted to Nina because she represents “the seduction of emancipated femininity” (Dryden, 2000, p.63).

Aissa, the half-Arabian girl in *An Outcast of the Islands*, is portrayed the same sensual and libertine as Nina. “As he (Willems) 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” (OI 68). The Oriental woman is visually sensual in her “strong, round arm” and “mass of loose black hair”. With “her rapid breathing”, “distended nostrils”, and “gleaming eyes” (OI 107), Aissa is frequently characterized as an uncivilized wild animal. Aissa’s savagery marks her cultural otherness which is determined by her inferior racial identity.

Nina and Aissa’s excessive sensuality, libertine sexuality and cultural savagery indicate their difference from the white male. The Oriental women’s alluring femininity and sexuality hint at a different sexual experience unobtainable in Europe and the savagery marks their difference from the civilized and cultivated white male. With their racial, gender and cultural difference, the Oriental women become the white male’s Other.

The Oriental women, constructed as the white men’s racial and gender Other, are crucial in white men’s identification process. The construction of the colonial identity demands an articulation of forms of racial, sexual and cultural difference. Just as Bhabha (1994) points out, “...question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming the image. The demand of identification—that is, to be for an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness” (p.45). Only through the Oriental female Other can the white male construct and find confirmation of their identity.

The stereotyping process exposes the white men’s mastery and domination on the Oriental women. The white men, belonging to a strong and conquering race, are in a position of power and thus able to freely fantasize and objectify the Oriental women to satisfy their desire for difference. In the white male fantasy, the Oriental women are no longer lively individuals but stagnant and universal stereotypes easily controlled and manipulated by the white men.

#### IV. ORIENTAL WOMEN STEREOTYPED AS NATURE

In *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, the Oriental women are portrayed to embody the female nature. Since nature means barbarism and savagery, the Oriental female, as the embodiment of nature, are considered primitive and savage. The Oriental women are stereotyped as Oriental nature by their intimacy with the surrounding natural environment. In *An Outcast of the Islands*, Aissa is an integral part of the natural surroundings. On the dark night, when she sits, “it was as if she had drawn slowly the darkness around her, wrapping herself its undulating folds that made her indistinct and vague” (OI 154). When she leaves, she would “back away and melt suddenly into the night” (OI 76). On the sunny day, when she stands in the forest, “...her head lost in the shadow of broad and graceful leaves that touched her cheek; while the slender spikes of pale green Orchids streamed down from amongst and mingled with the black hair that framed the face, as if all those plants claimed her for their own—the animated and brilliant flower of all that exuberant life which, born in gloom, struggles for ever towards the sunshine” (OI 76). Aissa’s intimacy with natural

environment shows her savagery and barbarism. Like the Oriental wilderness, she must be conquered and tamed by the white civilization.

The white men, associated with modern European male civilization, become the superior counterpart of the Oriental women. To connect the Oriental women with nature justifies the white men's attempt to civilize the Oriental women with the civilized Western culture. After Lingard's conquest of Sambir, the Western patriarchal power has penetrated into the female world and become the dominant order of Sambir. Lingard, in both novels, stands for Western patriarchy. He has brought the Western patriarchal order to Sambir and established around himself a male power and authority that nobody dares to challenge. Lingard has an absolute control of the natives and the white son figures. Everybody must succumb to his male power and authority. Called "Rajah Laut" or "King of the Sea" by the natives with awe and admiration, he is a master and a god in the natives' eyes. With his male power and authority, he has enjoyed the trade monopoly in Sambir and put the place under his protection for many years. Parry (1983) notes Conrad's attempt to "chronicle the lives of the colonizers as Promethean figures" (p.4). Lingard is depicted as a patriarchal god responsible for this world he thinks he has created. He considers Sambir his own Kingdom and believes firmly that only he can bring happiness to this land and its people.

The white men's colonial pursuits in Sambir are combined by two goals. Besides the exploitation of the Oriental wealth, they also consider their duty to bring the light of civilization to the dark corner of the world. Associating themselves with the modern civilization, Oriental nature's superior counterpart, the white men have a desire to civilize the savage native women.

Lingard, the domineering white father, had a firm belief in the superiority of the white culture and carried out his civilization project with full confidence. In his battle with the Malay pirates, he captured a Malay girl from the pirate boat and adopted her. To civilize the Malay girl, he sent her to a convent to eliminate her inborn savagery and passion. Lingard was "perfectly happy" in his arrangement to send the Malay girl to receive white education for "he had done his duty" (AF 23). "Do his duty" sounds ironical if the fact that Lingard had made her an orphan is taken into consideration.

Willems, likewise, wants to put Aissa under his civilizing influence "to fashion to mould – to adore – to soften" the Oriental woman (OI 92). Willems knows from experience that she must be "coaxed near" and "tamed gradually" for "a slight movement of his could frighten her away" (76). Willems treats Aissa as a wild animal and thus the taming of Aissa means the conquest and civilization of the primitive nature.

Western patriarchy is portrayed to have brought civilization to the Orient. This order and prosperity, however, are based on the marginalization and suppression of the Oriental women. To enslave the Oriental women spiritually, the white colonialists impose on the Oriental female the modern European culture and wish to suppress the nature of the Oriental women. By changing the passionate savages to obedient slaves, the civilization projects silence the Oriental women voice.

Mrs Almayer is the first victim destroyed by Lingard's civilization project. When she was still a little Malay girl, she was deprived of her natural relations and taken away from the adventurous pirate life by the white father, the right one who killed her parents and her own people. She used to have the same dream as a usual Malay girl, but her dreams collapsed overnight by Lingard's paternal benevolence. She was sent to a convent with high walls, quiet gardens and silent nuns and taught the new language and stuffed Christian teaching. The convent education aimed to suppress the Malay girl's inborn hot temper and her excessive passion and savagery and moulded her a reserved white lady. The convent education brought her so great sufferings that "she would have sought death in her dread and hate of such a restraint" (AF 22).

Mrs Almayer is not the only Oriental woman victimized by the white colonialists' civilization projects. Nina, Mrs Almayer's daughter, was also tortured by the white men's education project. Brought up by a white family in Singapore, her youth was spent in the same kind of acute conflict as her mother. Nina, a blend of white race and Malay race, in a world where the white and the yellow are polarized, has a strong anxiety about her identity. This anxiety was aggravated by her white education. Because of her white education, the native people in Sambir considered her a white lady while the Vinck family and Dutch officers still considered her a half-caste girl with contempt. The white education failed to erase her Eastern part and made her incomprehensible by both races and herself. Standing "between her mother and her father" and "between those two things so dissimilar, so antagonistic" (AF 151), she was caught in an internal conflict "with mute heart wondering and angry at the fact of her existence..." (AF 151).

#### V. ORIENTAL WOMEN SPEAK BACK: RESISTANCE TO MALE COLONIAL POWER

In *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, the Oriental women are confined to the fixed and frozen stereotypes and lose their individuality and dynamics. However, the Oriental women are by no means passive victims. Contrapuntal reading enables us to discern the Oriental women's resistance to the easy stereotypes they seem to represent.

The emasculation of men is the Oriental women's strategy of covert resistance. With their emasculating Oriental beauty, the Oriental women take power over both the native and white men and make them surrender to their female power. The Oriental Women are depicted to possess a deadly sexuality by their connection with the Oriental tropical

jungle. Stott (1992) has noted in Conrad's early Malay fiction, "...the Oriental 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"(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.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century European culture, central to masculinity was the code of chivalry which means the heroic, gentlemanly and devoted ideal of conduct. To the white men, masculinity indicated their racial superiority. With their deadly femininity and sexuality, the Oriental women dissolved both the white men and native men's masculine identity and make them feeble, coward and impotent in their embrace. Masculinity, the essence of male identity, was threatened and endangered by the corruptive power of Oriental femininity and sexuality.

Willems considered himself a white masculine hero who can "carry off anything, do anything, aspire to anything" (OI 9). In his encounter with the Oriental women, Willems suffered from a loss of the masculinity in the shadowy embrace of the Oriental women. In Conrad's Malay fiction, love usually means an emasculating surrender to the Oriental female. Watts (1992) notes how frequently in Conrad's fiction "a passionate sexual encounter seems, paradoxically, to emasculate the man, to be submissive, making him bewildered and self-doubting, and it sometimes results in his destruction" (p.98).

In *An Outcast of the Islands*, Aissa seduced Willems to control and conquer him. As a daughter of Malay pirates, she witnessed the white men's massacre of her own people and remembered vividly the catastrophe brought by the white men. To Aissa, Willems, a member of the white race, was a great and dangerous thing. Aissa desired to "vanquish, surmount and make a play thing" (OI 75) of the white man, whose enslavement means the surrender of the white race.

Aissa's look had the same magic effect to compel Willems. When she then opened wide her eyes and looked steadily at him, the enchanting looks darted at him "touched his brain and his heart together" (OI 69). "It seemed to him to be something loud and stirring like a shout, silent and penetrating like an inspiration" (OI 69). Under the caress of her looks, Willems' all senses are "drowned in the flood of drowsy serenity that follows upon a dose of opium" (OI 147). In Aissa's embrace, Willems' body is "passive" and "paralysed with dread" and robbed all power "to escape, to resist, or to move" (OI 148). Losing grip of reality in Aissa's embrace, the masculine white hero became vulnerable to the old and blind Omar's attack. In the short moment of lucidity, Willems fearfully realized "the assurance and pride of his cleverness; the belief in success, the anger of failure, the wish to retrieve his fortune, the certitude of his ability" (OI 77) had lost in his surrender to the Oriental woman. Willems, the great white man, had submitted to Aissa's Oriental femininity and sexuality and inevitably stepped onto a road of destruction.

Besides the emasculation of men as covert resistance, the Oriental women make powerful attack to the white male power overtly. The Oriental women's overt challenge to the white colonialists finds manifestation on their involvement in political schemes to undermine the white men's colonial dreams.

In *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, Sambir is the battlefield of different interest groups' racial, political and commercial conflicts. Babalatchi treated Lingard as the embodiment of white colonialism and tried all the means to oust the white power. Lakamba, who desired to become the new ruler of Sambir, considered Lingard the backbone of the old ruler and wants to subvert his power. Abdulla, the great Arabian merchant, wanted to break Lingard's monopoly of Sambir and competed with Lingard for the market. The subversion of the white power in Sambir became the common goal of the natives' intrigues.

The political schemes, however, are by no means an exclusive male province. The Oriental women are actively involved in the political plots to subvert the white power. Mrs Almayer and Aissa play a crucial role in the schemes to undermine the white men's colonial pursuits.

Mrs Almayer appeared in *Almayer's Folly* as a savage Oriental woman. In her outburst of savage nature, she burned the Europeans furniture and tore down the pretty curtain "in her unreasoning hate of those signs of civilization" (AF 26). Mrs Almayer's barbaric behaviors characterized herself as a sub-human and half-animal creature. However, under Mrs Almayer's mask of savagery was her hatred and revenge on the white culture. As Berthoud (1978) points out, these barbaric behaviors appear to be "gratuitous act on the part of Mrs Almayer, until one realizes that it is a gesture of cultural vandalism" (p.220).

Mrs Almayer's cultural vandalism accompanied her cultural recoding of the European culture, which was adopted by her as a strategy of resistance. Mrs Almayer did not simply destroy Almayer's curtains and furniture, but she made the Western curtains into sarongs for the slave girls and burned the showy furniture to cook the family rice. Besides, she re-appropriated Christianity in terms of her own culture. Taught in the convent, she understood little the faith the good sisters taught her, but only assimilated quickly only the superstitious elements of the religion when she attributed the little brass cross "some vague talismanic properties"(AF 41).

While rejecting the hegemonic Western culture, Mrs Almayer developed her own Malayan culture by passing the cultural tradition of Malay race to her daughter Nina. The legends of the Malay heroes and the oral tales of the past glory of great Rajahs became the cultural tie of the Oriental women. In her domestic education of Nina, Mrs Almayer would tell her "the story of deeds valorous, albeit somewhat blood thirsty, where men of her mother's race shone far above the Orang Blanda"(AF 64) and Nina would listen with avidity to her mother's tales of the Malay heroes, from whose race she had sprung. Mrs Almayer's legends and tales greatly influenced Nina and finally provoked the half-European girl to choose Malay culture.

Like her mother, Nina also resisted the barren Western culture embodied by her father's greed for gold and the white education imposed on her. Nina's first word in *Almayer's Folly*, though spoken to her father, was in Malay language. When she first met Dain, she instinctively "drew the lower part of the curtain across her face" (AF 55), a custom of Malay women. Choosing Dain as her future husband, Nina finally rejected the white civilization and embraced the Malay culture. Just as Mrs Almayer said to Nina, "You were his daughter then; you are my daughter now" (AF 150).

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Conrad's representation of the Oriental women in his early Malay novels is a misrepresentation. The Oriental women are stereotyped as beautiful seductresses to be the white male's racial, gender and cultural Other. Besides, the Oriental women are stereotyped as the embodiment of nature, the assumed order of the Orient. By stereotyping the Oriental women in representations, the West achieves a textual conquest of the Oriental women. In Western representations, the Oriental women are not lively individuals but easily controlled and manipulated objects available for the West to carry out various projects and unable to resist the projects, images and descriptions devised for them.

Although the Oriental women are suppressed by stereotypes, they do not accept with indifference the authority projected on them, but devise patterns of resistance to the male and colonialist power. By their covert and overt resistance, the Oriental women shatter the easy stereotypes they seem to represent and reveal their wisdom and vitality. They are not passive victims but empowered ones who try to make their voice heard.

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