

Objectivity in Joseph Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands: The Malay Archipelago* between the Geographical Accuracy and the Romantic Vision

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad wrote sixteen Malay works of fiction varying between short stories and novels. Critics have always hinted at his accuracy in the depiction of the Malay Archipelago. Florence Clemens notes that Conrad's "fiction should be read with atlases and geographies at hand. They prove that Conrad may be trusted as a geographer" (461). She adds that "a study of the fiction produces a true impression of the general topography of this area as well as innumerable clear-cut close views" (461). Conrad's concern with objectivity meant that he relied on his personal experience of the Malayan seas as chief mate on board the Vidar, the Otago, the Palestine and other ships and on books having a documentary aspect like Alfred Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* and James Brooke's diaries. However, in spite of his preoccupation with objectivity, Conrad endows the Malay Archipelago with a hellish aspect, and conveys it as an underworld.

Aspects of Objectivity in *An Outcast of the Islands*

In 1898, Hugh Clifford¹ published an article in the Singapore Press on Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*; he criticized Conrad's inaccurate picture of the Malays. Conrad read the article and felt distressed and in a letter to Blackwood, he wrote:

Well I never did set up as an authority on Malaysia. I looked at a medium in which to express myself. I am inexact and ignorant no doubt (most of us are) but I don't think I sinned so recklessly. Curiously enough all the details about the little characteristic acts and customs which they hold up as proof I have taken out (to be safe) from undoubted sources –dull, wise books. (130)

Conrad's distress and his reply to Clifford's criticism reveal that he was concerned with objectivity. This stems from his belief that fiction rests on facts and that its point of departure, for a flight into imagination, has to be the real.

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The first part of this paper attempts to trace the geographical precision in the representation of the Malay Archipelago in Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands*. In the second part I attempt to show that Conrad builds on this geographical precision to provide his romantic vision of the area as an underworld. Daniel Schwarz argues that "in his exotic Malay landscapes, Conrad created mindscapes of his own concerns" (125). The Malay world has much in common with the western conception of the underworld. Conrad adds a dark and melancholic mood to the Malay setting, and in so doing he makes of it a perfect underworld.

An Outcast of the Islands' first chapters are set in Macassar where the protagonist Willems works as a "confidential" clerk for Hudig & co. Macassar is situated in Southern Celebes in Indonesia. Willems embezzles money from Hudig's company for some trade business that he believes will help him become Hudig's partner. When Willems's illegal deeds are revealed, Hudig expels him and he has no other hope for a second chance but with his old friend Lingard. The latter suggests that he should go to work for him in a commercial outpost situated in Sambir:

"I am going to take you to Sambir," he said. "You've never heard of the place, have you? Well, it's up that river of mine about which people talk so much and know so little. I've found out the entrance for a ship of Flash's size. It isn't easy. You'll see. (43)

The way to Sambir, we are told, is northward:

The mate spoke with low distinctness from the shadows of the quarter-deck.

"There's the breeze. Which way do you want to cast her, Captain Lingard?" Lingard's eyes, that had been fixed aloft, glanced down at the dejected figure of the man sitting on the skylight. He seemed to hesitate for a minute.

"To the northward, to the northward," he answered. (44)

Robert Hampson argues that Conrad's Malaysia "stretches from Singapore to Bali, from Achin to New Guinea, from Sourabaya to Manila." And that "its centre is the island of Borneo. *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* take place in 'Sambir' (Tanjung Redeb) in Berau in north-east Borneo." Looking at the map of the Malay Archipelago, the way from south Celebes northward would lead to the northeast of Borneo. Though Conrad did not provide the real names of the places where the events of his novel are set, it is not difficult to trace their location on the map. From 1887 to 1888, Conrad was first officer of the Vidar ship which travelled continuously along the coast of Borneo and Celebes: Norman Sherry tells us that Conrad made four visits to the settlement of Tanjung Redeb; it is no wonder then that Conrad excels in providing the exact situation where the story of *An Outcast of the Islands* is set.

Sambir is a fictional island inspired by Tanjung Redeb which is a remote trading settlement on the river Berau in North-East of Borneo. Conrad is said to have visited the area at least four times while first officer of the Vidar. In *An Outcast of the Islands*, Sambir is set at the bank of the "muddy river" Pantai, a fictional river frequently mentioned in Conrad's Lingard Trilogy (*Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *The Rescue*). Norman Cherry devotes a chapter in his book *Conrad's Eastern World* to trace the real river which inspired the fictional Pantai. Sherry explains that "the fictional Eastern river in these three books (and perhaps in *The Rescue*) is based on Conrad's knowledge of the river Berau in Dutch East Borneo which he visited as mate of the Vidar"(119).

Conrad tells us that the river Pantai has two branches; from the settlement Sambir there could be seen "the junction of the two branches of the Pantai" (53). And that "spreading slowly over the lowlands, seems to hesitate, before it flows gently through twenty outlets; over a maze of mudflats, sandbanks and reefs, into the expectant sea" (98). Sherry explains that to provide the situation of the river with this accuracy, Conrad relied on *The Eastern*

Archipelogo Pilot. The book provides the same precision to describe the river: “the rivers Segah and Kalai...unite opposite the towns of Tabur and Sambaliung, at a distance of 34 miles from the sea” (122). The chart of the river Berau confirms these details of the topography. Norman Sherry is preoccupied with tracing Conrad’s exactitude in situating the setting of his Malay stories. Differently from what other critics think, he explains that Pantai is not a fictional name and proves that the Berau was originally called the Pantai. What Conrad did is simply make use of the actual name of the river. (119)

An Outcast of the Islands abounds with passages describing the buildings in the settlement of the fictional Sambir where houses are built using bamboo. Platforms, floors and roofs are all made up of bamboo. Through the frequent use of the word “bamboo”, Conrad shows that it is the main construction material for the Malays. Conrad must have relied on *The Malay Archipelago*, where Alfred Wallace explains that:

If a temporary house is wanted, either by the native in his plantation or by the traveller in the forest, nothing is so convenient as the Bamboo, with which a house can be constructed with a quarter of the labour and time than if other materials are used. (78)

This travel document is said to be Conrad’s “bedside book.” He relied on it a great deal to provide an authentic and trustworthy description of the geography of his Malay setting. Below is a passage from *An Outcast of the Islands* describing a set of bamboo houses built on the river bank:

The houses crowded the bank, and, as if to get away from the unhealthy shore, stepped boldly into the river, shooting over it in a close row of bamboo platforms elevated on high piles, amongst which the current below spoke in a soft and unceasing plaint of murmuring eddies. There was only one path in the

whole town and it ran at the back of the houses along the succession of blackened circular patches that marked the place of the household fires. (60)

The quoted passage corresponds to a photograph Norman Sherry was able to get from Australian Intelligence and it shows the precision with which Conrad provided his description of the scheme of buildings in Sambir. Today documentaries and photos of the Malay Archipelago are available in media; they are only another proof of Conrad's authentic depiction of the place.

Conrad's Eastern world can be summarized in two main elements: the river and the jungle. Having dealt above with the first element, the following section will consider the tropical rain forests. Norman Sherry assumes that Conrad could not have made more than four journeys in all to the Berau river and that the overall time he spent in the area could not have exceeded twelve days. The time he spent there was too short to allow him to get well acquainted with the setting and the people. So "to be safe", he referred to Brooke's diaries. On so many occasions, Brooke refers to the Eastern tropical forests as "jungles", which are described as "thick" "dense", "wild", "densely-wooded". Brooke keeps reminding his readers that the jungles he visited were "unknown" and that Borneo was "certainly one of the wildest and least-known quarters of the globe" (73). Conrad has recourse to similar expressions to paint the image of the Bornean jungles and the reader comes across descriptions of the jungles as being "walls of virgin forests" (61), "impenetrable" and "untouched".

A reading through *An Outcast of the Islands*, however, gives the impression that Conrad visited the interior of the Malay jungles if only once in his life to provide that detailed and accurate image of various tropical landscapes. In the opening chapter of his book *The Malay Archipelago*, Alfred Wallace provides one main common characteristic of the Malay jungles:

Contrasts of Vegetation. — Placed immediately upon the Equator and surrounded by extensive oceans, it is not surprising that the various islands of the Archipelago should be almost always clothed with a forest vegetation from the level of the sea to the summits of the loftiest mountains. (31)

Conrad seems to have taken Wallace's observations as his point of departure; the following passage repeats this description: "Above the shapeless darkness of the forest undergrowth rose the treetops with their high boughs and leaves standing out black on the pale sky—like fragments of night floating on moonbeams" (72).

For a detailed description of the jungle, Conrad seems to have relied more on Brooke's diaries. Indeed a comparative study of Conrad's Malay fiction and Brooke's diaries will, no doubt, show the similarity in style. Wallace's book is documentary, whereas Brooke's diaries are longer and more descriptive. Both Conrad and Brooke are meticulous, and the smallest details did not escape their attention. Here is a passage from Brooke's diaries describing the sceneries the travel through the river offered:

Glades and Glen, clothed in the richest foliage, attracted our attention; swelling knolls, with clumps of fine trees, festooned from bough to bough with enormous creepers, stood prominently forward mid the masses of thicker jungle; strange trees, rich, and to us unknown, flowers, gigantic ferns, and above all, the distinguishing feature of the eastern scenery-- the numerous and lovely tribe of palms-- were around us on every side. (5)

This very passage is echoed in *An Outcast of the Islands*:

Willems took one of Almayer's many canoes and crossed the main branch of the Pantai in search of some solitary spot where he could hide his

discouragement and his weariness. He skirted in his little craft the wall of tangled verdure, keeping in the dead water close to the bank where the spreading nipa palms nodded their broad leaves over his head. (61)

To provide an accurate image of the Malayan topography and landscapes Conrad relied on his own experience in the Eastern seas, and on what he calls “dull, wise books.” And though his reference to Brooke’s diaries and Alfred Wallace’s *The Malay Archipelago* imply underestimation, a careful study of these sources reveals his indebtedness to them.

Readers as well as critics are not concerned with Conrad’s sources as much as with his accurate image of the Malay Archipelago. Florence Clemens wrote two essays in relation to his Malay setting. In her essay “Conrad’s Malaysia,” she notes that “no clearer idea of Borneo’s huge, forested bulk, with its muddy rivers fed by heavy tropical rains, can be gained from books than from *Almayer’s Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, or *The Rescue*. Only rarely did Conrad part from his own geographical experience.” She concludes her essay by arguing that “his Eastern fiction will remain one of the permanent literary contributions about that particular section of the globe” (465).

The Malay Archipelago as an Underworld

Conrad’s Subjectivity

However, it is worth noting that nowhere in *An Outcast of the Islands* do we come across a passage which hints at the beauty of the place that has always been praised by its visitors as one of the first top destinations of tourists all over the world. Naturalists, explorers, colonial administrators, missionaries and tourists’ accounts of their visits in Malaya convey their fascination with the beauty of the area. In his journal about his expeditions and stay in the Malay Archipelago, James Brooke expressed his admiration of the Malay natural beauty. Hence, it is frequent to read passages telling us that “Every instant the scenery called forth exclamations of admiration and delight and we paused in the midst of our wild career to enjoy

its beauties” (5). And that “the scenery, especially of the islands around, is extremely beautiful” (21). Brooke tells us that he “rode out six or seven miles through a most beautiful country disposed like a park with trees and shrubs admirably grouped on the greenest sward and a small stream to enliven the scene”(47). The careful reader will not miss the Edenic imagery Brooke uses to express his admiration of the place.

Siti Nuraishah Ahmad wrote an interesting article on Malaysia, entitled “Malaysia as the Archetypal Garden of the British Creative Imagination.” Ahmad argues that European travel writing represented Malaysia as “a tropical garden of Eden.” He provides a study of the Eden archetype in the literary writings on Malaysia in a selection of novels written by three British novelists; Joseph Conrad, W. Somerset Maugham, and Anthony Burgess. He shows that, in Conrad’s Malay fiction- he takes *An Outcast of the Islands* as a case in point - Malay sceneries are Edenic and echo passages in Brooke’s journal. However, Conrad does not seem to be attracted to the beauty of the place as much as to its wild and uncontrollable nature. In the third part of *An Outcast of the Islands*, Lingard, “knowing nothing of Arcadia- he dreamed of Arcadian happiness for that little corner of the world which he loved to think his own” (167). By “that little corner of the world”, Conrad means Sambir. Ten pages before, Willems believes Sambir to be “a hole” in which he is buried (157). Conrad’s invocation of Arcadia is ironic. His perception of the place has nothing to do with the Edenic or the Arcadian. Indeed, the fictional Sambir is meant to be a “hole.”

An Outcast of the Islands is fashioned so as to sound like a romance. The descent into the underworld is one of the stages the protagonist must experience. Indeed, Conrad’s novel dramatizes this very stage. The novel’s story is about the protagonist’s bitter experience in an isolated Malay island. The Malay setting is selected to be the location of the underworld; mainly because it holds many similarities to Virgil’s Hades and Dante’s Inferno. In Classical literature, the underworld is portrayed as a place where the protagonist descends to a lower

world in search of truth, self-knowledge and wisdom. An *Outcast of the Islands*, just like *Heart of Darkness*, is a reworking of the old theme of descent. Virgil and Dante's hells consist essentially of two elements, forests and rivers. Conrad's setting revolves around the river Berau and the Bornean jungles. Indeed, there is an allusion to Virgil's *Aeneid* in the first part of the novel. Actually, the mere mention of Aeneas prepares the reader for a journey of descent into hell. For the despairing Almayer, Sambir is "an infernal place" (144). For Willems, it is simply "a hole" where he feels he is buried alive, and it is "a barbarous corner of the world" (60). The isolated and secret island is made a prison for the protagonists of *An Outcast of the Islands*, Willems as well as Almayer dies in the very place they desperately aspire to escape from.

In *Rereading Conrad*, Schwarz deals with Conrad's imaginary creation of the Malay setting; the idea being that setting in his fiction is not a matter of pure fact. Daniel R Schwarz speaks about "the process of creating setting" or "setting making" (121). In an age that was characterized by its tendency to use realism, Conrad attempted to write about a hell that is as real as the imaginary mythical hells of Virgil and Dante. Conrad envisaged setting his story in an underworld like place, then he thought of the Eastern world. This could possibly be the reason that prevented him from perceiving the Malay natural beauty the way many explorers and adventures (James Brooke, and Alfred Wallace) did. "It is no wonder, then," Janice Ho explains, "that travel writing took an inward turn: if foreign lands were already known, one's perspective on them was not and could still remain unique; the emphasis became the traveler's point of view rather than the place traveled to" (125).

Elements of the Underworld in Conrad's Eastern World

The river Pantai is the Styx which, in Greek mythology, is one of the rivers that lead to Hades. The Pantai river with its brown water was there, ready to carry friends or enemies, to nurse love or hate on its submissive and heartless bosom, to help or to hinder, to save life or give death; the great and rapid river: a deliverance, a prison, a refuge or a grave (178) . Here, the description of the river is highly figurative; it is constructed on personification and paradox. The first series of paradoxes suggest an impassive, hostile and egoist river that is completely unconcerned with the human anxieties and pains. The last paradoxes suggest another detail characteristic of the river in Greek mythology, it is the way that takes to Hades and brings back to home, if the adventurer is lucky.

Similarly, Pantai leads to Sambir, which is described as being the very location of evil, a place where stray, adventurous men go to meet their shadows. There are passages where Conrad's tendency to make of the Malay setting a hellish place defeats his helpless attempts to describe it in a positive way. In chapter four of the third part, the narrator describes Lingard's love of the river Pantai and Sambir, the island that he discovered and takes to be his own. The descriptive adjectives that are supposed to connote a positive idea about the place cannot help turn into disparaging epithets suggesting gloominess, cruelty and despair-which makes it a setting adequate to the atmosphere of the underworld.

He[Lingard] loved it all: the landscape of brown golds and brilliant emeralds under the dome of hot sapphire. He loved the heavy scents of blossoms and black earth, that breath of life and of death which lingered over his brig in the damp air of tepid and peaceful nights. He loved the narrow and sombre creeks, strangers to sunshine: black, smooth, tortuous—like byways of despair. (168)

In this passage, the description of Sambir is actually built on an ironic opposition between a hot, apathetic, somber, strange and depressing setting and the anaphoric structure "he loved"

that opens every descriptive sentence of the place; it is as if Conrad is leading the reader to wonder if there is anything in the whole place that deserves to be loved.

This very passage is to be opposed to another one where Almayer expresses his hatred and rejection of Sambir:

And Almayer sat, his face in his hands, looking on and hating all this: the muddy river; the faded blue of the sky; the black log passing by on its first and last voyage; the green sea of leaves—the sea that glowed shimmered, and stirred above the uniform and impenetrable gloom of the forests—the joyous sea of living green powdered with the brilliant dust of oblique sunrays. He hated all this; he begrudged every day—every minute—of his life spent amongst all these things; he begrudged it bitterly. (237)

Anaphora builds the above text; “he hated all this” is integrated as a leitmotif contributing in creating a gloomy and distressing atmosphere Conrad elaborates to suggest acutely his image of the underworld.

Indeed the above passage is one of many where Conrad provides a Malay landscape that is dark and dreary, one that inspires distress, fear and depression. Most of the events of the novel take place at night; that is described as “a sea of darkness,” “immense, profound and quiet” (131). In chapter six of the second part, Conrad insists on situating the whole story in “the dark background of the night” (177). He keeps reminding his readers that “the night was very dark,” (177) and that it is “more vast and more dark” (34). And if time is not night, then it is “a morning without sun after a night without stars” and “a murky day,” (199) “without a colour and without sunshine: incomplete, disappointing, and sad” (194). Northrop Frye explains that “on the lower reaches of descent we find the night world” (111). He adds that “most of what goes on in the night world of romance is cruelty and horror.”(113) Hades of

The Iliad and *The Odyssey*, Virgil and Dante's Hells are described in the same way: a dismal, murky and dark realm. The following passage is quoted from Canto I of Dante's *Inferno*:

In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
Gone from the path direct: and e'en to tell,
It were no easy task, how savage wild
That forest, how robust and rough its growth,
Which to remember only, my dismay
Renews, in bitterness not far from death (1)

The opening verses of *The Inferno* introduce a setting that combines the thick forest and gloominess which together with the distress and feelings of "bitterness" have contributed through time in creating our idea of the underworld. Similarly, in *An Outcast of the Islands*, darkness is the general mood of the story; it becomes one of the most haunting aspects of the novel.

The underworld is believed to be located beneath the earth. Willems refers to Sambir as a "hole", a place that calls to mind a deep and isolated place of confinement. This impression about the place is more reinforced towards the end of the novel. Willems falls in love with a Malay woman for whose sake he betrays his old friend and helper, Lingard, who visits him intending to kill him for revealing his secret island, but then discovers that a better punishment would consist in imprisoning him in an isolated corner of Sambir- Willems chose to be his retreat. Chapter five of the fourth part dramatizes this scene. Looking at Willems and considering his decadence, Lingard "had the impression of surveying them[Willems and Aissa] from a great and inaccessible height" (223). In so doing, Conrad suggests that the place where the couple lives is situated in a lower place; the setting that is meant for the punishment of the wicked. In Greek mythology, Hades is a place of imprisonment, where the

trapped souls are not allowed to return home. Willems becomes Lingard's "prisoner"; the old man finally reveals to him his revenge plan, and tells him: "you are my prisoner" (225) and a little further, he confirms it: "you are buried here" (227). When Lingard leaves the island, he leaves no boat for Willems, who spends the few days before he dies in the desperate hope of being rescued. What follows is an excerpt from the last scene of the novel; it deals with the place where Lingard buried Willems, ironically leaving no doubt that Sambir is actually a grave and a perfect underworld.

The forests, unchanged and sombre, seemed to hang over the water, listening to the unceasing whisper of the great river; and above their dark wall the hill on which Lingard had buried the body of his late prisoner rose in a black, rounded mass, upon the silver paleness of the sky. (294)

The scene closes the novel with the most characteristic elements of the underworld: the indifferent river, the "unchanged forest" and the "somber", "black" and "dark" mood. This is Conrad's final attempt to carve the gloomy image of Sambir as an underworld in the memory of his novel readers. Of all Conrad's Malay fiction, *An Outcast of the Islands* is the most capable of providing sensations similar to those we get when we read his *Heart of Darkness*. Daniel Schwarz explains that "had Conrad not gone on to write *Heart of Darkness*, we might be more attentive to the extent to which Sambir embodied Conrad's nightmare of various kinds of moral degeneracy and how it is for him a grim Dantesque vision of damnation" (121).

In his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad writes that "my task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. That – and no more, and it is everything. (14)" The word "see" is to be considered literally and figuratively. With regard to *An Outcast of the Islands*, Conrad was authentic in rendering the topography as well as the Malay landscapes. However, critics

of Conrad's fiction believe that by "see", he meant not only visual perception but the apprehension of an idea. In Conrad's eyes, the Malay Archipelago happens to be a real setting that shares much with the western idea of the underworld: the jungle, the rivers and the cloudy climate. There is much of Conrad's idea about the underworld that he imposes on the Malay setting. The mention of *The Aeneid* is evidence of that. Conrad's fiction proves, once again, that the realm of fiction is doomed to be subjective; the real stimulates its imagination and is never an end in itself.

Notes

1. Hugh Clifford (1866-1941) he was a British colonial administrator. He arrived in [Malaya](#) in 1883, aged 17. He socialized with the local [Malays](#) and studied their [language](#) and culture deeply. Clifford served as [British Resident](#) at [Pahang](#), 1896–1900 and 1901–1903, and Governor of [North Borneo](#), 1900–1901. He wrote essays, letters and novels in which he told about his experience in the Malay Archipelago.

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