

## **White Men in the Brown World: A Study of Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands***

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### **Abstract:**

Joseph Conrad's debut novel *Almayer's Folly* was published in 1895, and his second novel *An Outcast of the Islands* was published in 1896. Both the novels have a close relationship with one another as they deal with the similar characters, events and settings. *Almayer's Folly* speaks about the failure of Kasper Almayer's imperialist dream while *An Outcast of the Islands* reveals the undoing and evil character of Willems. Conrad provides these novels with Malayan backgrounds. The Malay Archipelago had been the hotspot for the Portuguese, English, Dutch and Spanish where they claimed a share in the wealth. In the name of protection, they exploit the native tribes. Almayer and Willems, the white men, are representatives of the colonial power and mindset. The two white men leave their communities, try to grab wealth in the Brown world, and wish to go back to their own civilization. They establish relationship with the natives for their ulterior motives. Their main purpose is to create wealth for themselves. For them human relationships are secondary. This, later on leads to conflict. The Malay stories carry several themes and complications of rivalry amongst men of different topographical and racial backgrounds. This paper is an endeavour to highlight the conflict between the whites and the browns because of the attitudinal differences.

**Keywords:** imperialist, betrayal, savage, native, culture, race, conflict.

“It is written that the earth belongs to those who have fair skins and hard but foolish hearts.”

- Joseph Conrad

Mr Almayer, the chief protagonist of *Almayer's Folly*, is an agent of western civilization - a white man of a typical westernized outlook. The world he creates for himself in Malay is a prototype of the world he comes from. A sense of unsolved tension and the encounter of one culture with another govern the novel:

The Malay fictions can be read as cautionary tales in which white men behave some-times well, but more often badly, under savage circumstances that put their racial or cultural loyalties to the test; but they can also be read as if from the “other side”, as what Hugh Clifford called “studies in brown humanity” under increasing pressure from the well-armed emissaries of Western progress and enlightenment (Moore 21).

There are many remarkable instances in the novel which show the attitude of the white men in the alien land. Lingard, who had established his business at Pantai river, offers a marriage proposal of his adopted daughter to Almayer. But Almayer foresees only “great piles of shining guilders” that he might have as an output of a marriage. Oliveira rightly points out, “[...] Almayer curbs his white man's pride and marries an imperfectly acculturated Malay girl” (16). He lives an elusive life. He does not worry much about the girl whom he would marry. He thinks of her as “Malay woman, a slave, after all” and expects her merciless death (Conrad *Almayer's Folly* 10-11).

The ambition of enormous wealth to be gained through trade with the help of native brown people has pushed him to the jungles of Sambir. This initial ‘mistake’ causes him distress throughout the life he spends at Sambir. As Gail Fraser has suggested, the treatment of miscegenation in Conrad's Malay fiction generally is original and provocative, having an important representative function in revealing “the logic of racial myths and phobias – the imaginative and emotional constructs that inform imperialist ideology” (qtd. in Owen Knowles “Introduction” *Almayer's Folly* xxxi).

As the story begins, Almayer seems to be musing on his glorious future in Europe, loaded with “the piles of gold” for which he has sent Dain Maroola, a native Malay Chief. He feels very unlucky and broken because others have accumulated the gold in good quantity, but he has not ensured any. The river is pivotal to the novel which controls Almayer's internal and external qualities – his desires, dreams, downfall and death.

An ingrained distrust exists between the Brown and the White. Being a prejudiced European, Almayer fails to appreciate his wife and even his daughter, Nina. He does not understand why his women get attracted to Dain and belittle and disregard him as a petty trader. Dain, "the man wants to collect trepang and birds' nests on the islands" (46) appears to be a dominating force in his life. He holds Dain inferior due to the habit of 'trepang-hunting' – deceives no one in Sambir except Almayer.

But skin colour remained the visible mark of the superiority of whites over non-whites, who felt no special need to distinguish masters from slaves, since both were equally beneath the white man's notice. As studies in brown humanity, the Malay fictions can be read as explorations of interracial relations and the local politics of ethnic survival in a context of colonial myopia and cultural arrogance. (Moore 22)

His indifferent and antagonistic attitude towards the non-white natives does not allow him to discern the threat of Dain's presence. Being ignorant to Dain's real calibre, he engages him in futile works. Therefore, he has to rely on Dain for the accomplishment of his dream of getting gold. Despite his belief in Dain, Almayer fails to discover his humanity or identity.

When his plan of obtaining gold through Dain has failed, Almayer comes face to face with Nina. Substituting a bruised dead body of a Malay for Dain's at the riverbank, he has a frightening awareness of failure. Identifying himself with the deceased, he feels inclined to weep "over the fate of a white man" (79). He blames Nina for not grieving for Dain's sudden departure. Her calm and composed posture irritate him. He rebukes her for her indifferent attitude and inability to understand the intensity of his grief. He desired to be rich and also wanted to get away from the alien land to see white men bowing low before the power of Nina's beauty and wealth. He had planned a great future for her, but Dain's death shattered everything for him. This conversation with Nina is a testimonial of Almayer's prejudiced nature towards the brown people.

Nina knows the secret of Dain's hidden existence, so she says nothing to comfort her father over his assumed death in the river. She denies giving Almayer the sympathy he demands because she does not wish to reveal her love for Dain. Almayer cannot understand her secret fear. Nina's silence angers him to say: "Are you content to live in this misery [...] Have you no words of comfort for me? I that loved you so" (81). It is not the sorrow of death; it is a pain of frustration he receives from the undoing of his plan for wealth. Ignorant about Nina's role in the replacement of the boatman's body with Dain's, Almayer perceives the

death of Dain through fantasies of his own destruction. Seeing the corpse later, he bursts out: "First one hope, then another, and this is my last. Nothing is left now" (113).

It is irony of his life that he wishes to search gold with which he would establish Nina as a wealthy European lady, but the passion operates negatively; leaves his half-caste daughter away forever from European civilization. He expects that Dain will help him explore the treasure up the Pantai river. But Dain's involvement in the scheme leads to destruction of Almayer's trading post. It also breaks Almayer's dreams of luxurious future in the white community. Nina, the only person besides himself for whom he cares, feels contempt for her father and also for all the whites. She rebels against the forces of civilization and turns towards the Brown world.

Nina outlines in her person the complicated union of white and brown cultures. She is divided between serious affection for her father and the savage obsession of her mother. Her two-fold nature is the result of the unhappy union of the white and the brown which defines her parent's marriage in the novel. The European father and the Malay mother, the representatives of two opposite cultures, try to attract her to their side.

The novel shows the narrow outlook of a white man. He either thinks about himself or people very close to him. Almayer desires to give Nina a luxurious life and prestige in Europe, and wishes to find a white guy for her marriage. A rumour of Lingard's hidden treasure of gold and diamonds works like a passion in him. He boasts himself to be the legal successor to Lingard's wealth.

He earnestly waits for the day when he and his half-caste daughter would move away from Sambir to settle down in Europe, where they would enjoy a life of wealth and respect and the beauty of "the immense wealth" would influence the white people (5). Nobody will think about her brown colour or mixed blood. Almayer thinks of placing his daughter as a white woman, buying respectability for her with the wealth he dreams about. Affection for Nina and concern for wealth have been the ruling passion of his life. Mrs Almayer, Nina's mother, on the other hand, wants to stop Nina's marriage to a white man. Oliveira recorded the background of Nina's decision. Influenced by her mother's stories of white men's treachery in the past, she tries to "discard her white heritage and chooses her dark half" (17).

Nina and her mother share some common incidents. Their lives are sharply divided between Malayan and European surroundings. Mrs Almayer had once told Nina how she had escaped from a pirate ship. Lingard had seen her in a critical condition. Lingard guarded her, but he set the boat, loaded with exhausted and dead brown pirates, on fire mercilessly. She was, later on, placed in the Christian atmosphere. She did not like the fake discipline and

‘ethical teaching’ of the convent. Concealing her "hate and contempt for all", she spent four years there. But there is hardly any change in her attitude. The white civilization had failed to change her attitude. Like her mother, Nina is uprooted from the native surroundings. Almayer takes her to Mrs Vinck in Singapore to be brought-up and educated in a ‘civilized society’. He pushes her into a refined Christian setting, but the real experience at Singapore makes Nina conscious of the biased and inhuman mentality of the whites and how they think of the half-castes Her upbringing amongst the whites comes to an unexpected end. Nina had experienced ‘days of restraint, of sorrow, and of anger’ in Singapore (58).

Nina can understand her mother’s experience. In the long narrative of her mother, she remembers her distress and disgrace, and also the grandeur of Malayan self-esteem. She has the strength to turn the experiences, the order of experiences which her mother had, in a reverse manner. Therefore, she chooses the brown world consciously; her mother did not have the opportunity to choose.

Nina’s choice between a world of discrimination and a world where people establish a real communion is a cross-cultural conflict of the Brown and the White. Almayer represents White and the Malay Dain Brown. Both strive for the love of Nina. Their struggle for her affection becomes the axle around which the ideological conflict of the story is developed. Dain, the active and young man, is much distinguished from the passive, hesitant and aged Almayer. Conrad presents Dain as a perfect foil to the character of Almayer. When Nina has to choose between Dain Maroola and Almayer, she chooses Dain. She has no emotional connect with Almayer. On the other hand, she can immediately connect with Dain. Feeling no remorse at leaving, Nina breaks Almayer’s heart. “The ever-failing fortune of this man, Almayer; the savage hatred for him of his Malay wife; the half-hearted affection of his daughter; and the consistent treachery of every other creature towards him, save the hero a Rajah’s son, Dain Maroola, form the thread of the story” (Sherry 49).

In the climax, Nina urges her father not to forget her. This is a soothing experience for Almayer. After her departure, he falls on his knees and quickly rubs out her footprints from the sand. He strives hard to erase her every thought and memory from his mind, but he is not able to forget her till the end. Almayer does not wish to forgive her daughter; he wishes to forget her. Conrad concludes the senselessness of Almayer’s attitude, both as a father and as a man: “[...] That was his idea of his duty to himself—to his race—to his respectable connections; to the whole universe unsettled and shaken by this frightful catastrophe of his life” (150).

Almayer struggles with an intolerable incident – sailing his beloved daughter away from him. For a moment, he thinks of accompanying Nina to a new life forgetting his shame, and pain, and anger but immediately he controls his feelings and reasserts himself as a white man: “I will never forgive you, Nina!” (151) For him, the love for pride and wealth is more important than the love for his daughter.

Conrad highlights the rapid decline of Almayer's fortune in the concluding part of the novel. The weight of his downfall and guilt crushes him physically and mentally; the desertion of all intensifies his condition. He gets trapped in the circumstances from where escape is impossible. Obsessed with his ambition and guided by the beliefs of European culture, he does not accept the relationship between Nina and Dain. His abandoned and rotten house named “Almayer's Folly” symbolises the failure of his materialistic hopes and European ideals in the Brown world.

*An Outcast of the Islands* also shares the same Malayan setting of his first novel. It also re-asserts the issues of deception, the risk of dreaming a miraculous destiny, the tension between the black and white, and the hazards of loneliness. Peter Willems, the central character in the novel, steals money from Hudig's account. Therefore, he is dismissed from the company. His family members including his wife insult him for his crime. Being an egotist by nature, he does not like the remarks and taunts of the people living in the vicinity. In such a situation, looking at Lingard's ship, he plans a drama of committing suicide. He desires to grab the attention and sympathy of Captain Lingard. He succeeds and Lingard saves him and takes under his protection and provides him with a newer opportunity to re-establish himself in Sambir. It is an upriver settlement where he can enjoy a growing monopoly of the White. But he does not like the atmosphere there and feels lonely and isolated. In Sambir, he is not able to maintain a cordial relationship even with Almayer, another white man who has been the in-charge of Lingard's station. He feels isolated and dislocated on a strange island. Through suffering, he knows that he exists, reflects upon himself and life, and tries to know the conditions of his existence. He experiences embarrassment as an outcast, but ego, arrogant attitude, and anger command his demeanour. He attempts to attain happiness through his passion – his love for Aissa, a brown girl and the daughter of a blind Arab chieftain Omar. Although Willems seems to be in love with Aissa, their timeless world is just an allusion concealing their actual isolation from each other. When Aissa arrives in her native dress, she is an “animated package of cheap cotton goods” for Willems (Conrad *An Outcast of the Islands* 100). He assumes that the veiling locks up a real communication between them, disgraced him as a human being, cut off from culture and

civilized feeling. The couple had "nothing in common - not a thought, not a feeling"(100). As a partner in life, he could not have even a good talk with her.

The brown beauty of Aissa haunts Willems and blinds him to the requirements of civilization. "Aissa evokes the latent savagery in his nature and performs a function similar to Nina's by representing for Willems, as Nina did for Dain, the paradox of life involvement: the need for submission to it, and the degradation it entails" (Bala 62). He realises that his wife has grabbed "his very individuality"(62). When Willems's connection to the civilized world collapses, he starts engaging himself in every affair unconsciously. The savage masters the civilized: "[...] man had been originally created as white and civilized, with the true religion revealed to him, but had in certain circumstances since degenerated into savagery" (Young 44).

A collateral effect results in the disruption of civilized ideals. The relationship does not allow him to think who he is. The intense sensuality of his love accelerates his downfall: deceiving Captain Lingard is an instance of ultimate downfall. In the last meeting with Lingard, Willems perceives his kinship with the white man: "[...] 'white man' and a 'Malay', Willems and Babalatchi, were to share the same position of the vagabond and outcast in the same riverside town of Berau" (Yoo 17). He tries to be free from Aissa so that he can renew his relation with Lingard, who represents the white community, the society he desperately craves. Willems tells Lingard, that he could have easily hurt and destroyed him - he could have shot him. but Lingard reacts with assurance: "You would have missed [...] There is, under heaven, such a thing as justice" (205). If he were a brown Malay, Lingard could shoot him easily: the cruelty of punishment diminishes because of white colour in the brown man's land.

Apart from his relationship with the whites, he does not seem to be very humanistic as he frequently shows. "Lingard's whiteness entitles him to direct the conversation, and to speak bluntly to Babalatchi, as white men do, without ritual or circumlocution, and thus without respect. He not only looks white, he talks white; as he reminds Babalatchi: "I am like other whites, and do not wish to speak many words when the truth is short" (qtd. in Moore 24).

Willems sees the river as a means of escape, but it turns out to be the source of frustration, and finally death. He tries to leave the island in a boat, leaving behind his wife and child. But Aissa, who has been instrumental in re-igniting his conscience earlier, now ends his life with a bullet. Seeing him with his wife and child – Willems's family ties of which she had been unaware – Aissa realizes that he has deceived her. She envies Willems's

commitment to the white woman. To her, Willems's betrayal becomes the cruel manifestation of the evil and hypocrisy of white society. Conrad considers her feelings as she prepares to aim the gun at Willems: "Hate filled the world, filled the space between them [...] against the man born in the land of lies and of evil from which nothing but misfortune comes to those who are not white" (275). To remain sane, Willems strives desperately to rejoin the white civilization. Hampson describes the activities of the Whites in the Brown world:

*An Outcast of the Islands* revolves around the betrayal of this passage to the Arab trader, Abdulla, by Lingard's protégé, Willems - and the destruction of Lingard's trading monopoly in Sambir as a result. The action of *Almayer's Folly* similarly revolves around Almayer's continuation of Lingard's explorations in the interior of Borneo in search of gold. (40).

To sum up, it is explicit that both the stories convey the theme of racial antagonism: Almayer, Lingard and Willems - the white men, represent European colonial culture while Mrs Almayer, Nina, Dain Maroola and Aissa, the Malayan figures, represent the Brown people. Situations compel them to be in a good relationship, but inherent racial malice emerges as a great barrier, which subsequently separates the browns from the whites. One of the most conspicuous characteristics of Conrad's Eastern novels is that the white men remain white – proud of their European breeding - they do not wish to be the part of the Brown community; rather, they are inclined to grab the native resources and to settle down peacefully among the whites. They put money and power as prime goals. For them kinship is secondary – the flaw which subsequently destroys everything.

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