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Perilous Peripheries: Isolated Outposts as Moral Crucibles in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Syed Waliullah's *Lalsalu*

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Abstract:

The image of an outpost is often associated with a corner of civilised society which denotes isolation, segregation, and separation from the heart of civilisation. Isolation here situates inhabitants in a position of constant tension between moral constraints and an achieved liberation from it. Joseph Conrad's portrayal of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* reveals a man's shunning the world of commonplace values and morals of the white European society, ending up becoming instead the 'king' of an outpost in colonial Congo. On the other hand, Majid in Syed Waliullah's *Lalsalu* represents the figure of a religious beacon to the people of a village who despair for an anchor. The article aims to analyse how such outposts (both literal and metaphorical) serve as crucibles, impacting the gradual transformation and transgression underlying acts of moral decadence and the persistent submission to greed and brutal ambitions.

Keywords: isolation, outpost, civilisation, decadence, liminality.

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Introduction

The geospatial trajectory of modernist literature presents the scope of reading and interpreting the "isolated outpost" not just as a coordinate on a map but as a metaphysical space, a distinct psychological zone where the social conduct and comforting lull of civilisation —with its police, its legal forces, its neighbours and families, and its established moral codes—fade into a terrifying and palpable silence. It is within this silence that the human soul is placed under a microscope. Two authors, separated by half a century, a vast geographical stretch, and distinct cultural inheritances, mastered the architecture of this specific literary space: Joseph Conrad, the Polish-British mariner who navigated the twilight of European imperialism, and Syed - Waliullah, the Bengali existentialist who chronicled the stagnation of rural East Bengal.

Joseph Conrad (christened Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniwoski, 1857-1924) lived across three countries—Poland, where he was born; France, where he first received his appointment in a ship; and England, where he lived as a citizen till the end. He could speak and write in three languages—Polish, French, and English. His life and adventures took him to the sea and to the ports, harbours and coasts of various nations at a time that also caused him to witness the evils of colonialism first-hand. His narration in *Heart of Darkness* about Charlie Marlow's voyage into the Belgian Congo interestingly mirrors Conrad's own experiences of the same at the height of the colonial rule of King Leopold II. The dehumanising colonial practices that he saw and lived through in the Congo shaped his literary sensibilities, enabling him to capture the essential darkness that lurks at the heart of civilisation and comes to the fore once the lights of morality are turned off. His portrayal of the Belgian company's highly esteemed agent Kurtz, son of a half-English mother and a half-French father, represents the pinnacle of the descent into a silence that screams moral bankruptcy and a darkness that illuminates a sinister greed for absolute power which dominates the innermost psychological forces of civilisation.

Sayed Waliullah (1922-1971), a pioneering Bangladeshi novelist, playwright and short story writer, was hailed as an existential explorer of the liminal spaces where modern civilisation and the individual intersect. *Lalsalu*, published in 1949, was his first novel. Written during the immediate aftermath of the partition of the Indian subcontinent on the basis of the two-nation theory, the novel penetrates into the depths of the social and individual crises that characterise a society which revolves around religious customs, rituals, blind faith, and superstitions. The source of power in this novel comes from the manipulation of religion to manufacture fear. Majid, the protagonist, is a master artist who creates and instils fear in the minds of the villagers of Mohabbatnagar thereby obtaining control over their lives. Like a puppeteer, he directs and drives episodes in the eventless regularity of the village with the sinister aim to secure his position as an omnipotent fate-maker.

While outposts in Conrad's oeuvre are often situated on the edges of the 'dark' wilderness of Africa or the Malay Archipelago while those in Waliullah's are located in the remote, sun-baked and stasis-laden villages of the Ganges Delta, both authors utilise the setting of the isolated outpost for a singular, shared purpose: to dismantle the protagonist's social identity. In the works of both men—most notably Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and *An Outcast of the Islands*, and Waliullah's *Lalsalu* (*Red Cloth*) and *Chaander Amabasya* (*Night of No Moon*)—the outpost functions not as a place of refuge, but as a crucible. It is a vacuum where the external restraints of society dissolve, leaving the individual alone with their own hollowed-out morality, their unchecked will to power, and the creeping realisation of their own fraudulence.

The Void as the Vessel: The Jungle and the Delta

Both in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Waliullah's *Lalsalu*, the environment works as an active antagonist that enforces isolation: the jungle swallows all connections that Kurtz had

with the civilised world, while the village of Mohabbatnagar presents Majid with an ideal opportunity to impose his own religious codes to play God. Both spaces are devoid of any perceivable social restraint that can challenge the unbridled greed of the protagonists. On one hand, Marlow repeatedly refers to the void of the wilderness as something that has a life of its own: "The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest has stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (Conrad 58). The wilderness into which Marlow's voyage takes us is enmeshed with some kind of "black and incomprehensible frenzy" (59) which not only potentially threatens the sanity of the white European but also stirs the beast within. Its preys upon the moral ideas of the individual nurtured by the conducts of civilisation and turns him into empty shell that echoes the atavistic reflexes of the primordial man. On the other hand, Waliullah in *Lalsalu* describes Mohabbatnagar thus:

> The impulse of the crowd of this barren land to leave keeps even the foggy sky stand on its guard. There is nothing for the families…Uneven distribution of resources, loots and murders abound. The scenario is the same for as far as the eyes could see, on the other side of the river, outside the province or even in faraway lands. The houses that burn with hope and all-engulfing hopelessness add to the existing sense of nothingness. (11)

To understand the psychological collapse of the characters, one must first understand the hostility of the stage upon which they act. For both Conrad and Waliullah, the environment, in this regard, is nowhere near a passive backdrop.

In Conrad's universe, the outpost is defined by its inscrutability. In *Heart of Darkness*, the Inner Station is besieged by a great silence—one that seems to judge the intruder. The jungle is portrayed as an ancient, chaotic force—one that rejects the linear logic of the European

mind. Its monstrous air of freedom seems to constitute a certain biological imperative that threatens to swallow the tenuous order the white man tries to impose upon it. The Congo river here acts as a severing mechanism, cutting the protagonst off from social oversight. In this vacuum, the silence of the wilderness becomes a canvas upon which the protagonist projects his own suppressed desires. It is interesting to note what Carl Gustav Jung had to reminisce when he wrote about his voyage to Africa:

> In travelling to Africa to find a psychic observation post outside the sphere of the European, I consciously wanted to find that part of my personality which had become invisible under the influence and the pressure of being European. This part stands in unconscious opposition to myself, and indeed I intend to suppress it. In keeping with its nature, it wishes to make me unconscious…so as to kill me; but my aim is, through insight, to make it more conscious. (31)

This Jungian self-analysis very clearly shows why and how the outpost in the Congo serves as a vessel for Kurtz to undergo certain changes on the unconscious level. The geography of Congo is the geography of isolation. Marlow describes the Inner Station in the following lines:

> Through my glasses I saw the slope of a hill interspersed with rare trees and perfectly free from undergrowth. A long decaying building on the summit was half buried in the high grass; the large holes in the peaked roof gaped black from afar; the jungle and the woods made a background. There was no enclosure or fence of any kind; but there had been one apparently, for near the house half-a-dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls. The rails or whatever there had been between, had disappeared. Of course the forest surrounded all that. (Conrad 88)

Waliullah's geography achieves the same isolation through different elemental means. In *Lalsalu*, the village of Mohabbatnagar is not surrounded by a menacing jungle, but by a suffocating stasis. It is a remote village cut off not by distance alone, but by a dense fog of ignorance, superstition, and agricultural rhythm. The landscape is flat, the sun is relentless, and the air is stagnant. This is how Waliullah portrays the barren, stagnant land of Mohabbatnagar: "[T]he place is like a place of the dead. Without harvest. Whatever little harvest is there does not suffice the need of the increasing number of people. And that is why they feel special only when they feel the closeness of God" (12).

While Conrad's jungle screams, Waliullah's delta whispers. The isolation here is social and intellectual; the protagonist, Majid, is surrounded by people, yet he is utterly alone because he exists on a different intellectual plane. He is isolated by his own deceit. The village, much like Conrad's station, is a closed system where the laws of the outside world do not apply. In both geographies, the result is the same: the suspension of external judgment. The outpost creates a moral extra-territoriality. Without the gaze of one's peers or the threat of legal consequence, the protagonist is forced to answer a question that civilization usually answers for him: What is right, and who is God?

The Architecture of the Impostor: Kurtz and Majid

The parallel between Kurtz and Majid becomes extremely striking when their relation to their surroundings is approached. Both of them are impostors in the sense that they arrive at the places they begin to dominate from somewhere else: Kurtz, who comes to the Belgian Congo and is appointed at the Inner Station of the Company, is a white European; Majid, too, is an outsider to the village where he comes to settle. Both protagonists redefine the archetype of the charismatic impostor—one who comes to the outpost pretending to execute promises of well-

being and propserity for the local people only to establish supreme authority over them by deifying themselves. Kurtz's own estimation of his work at the station is described thus:

> He began with the arguments that we whites, from the point of development we arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity'. (Conrad 84)

A man of 'universal genius' and high European ideals, Kurtz travels to the Congo with the intention of civilising the 'savages'. However, the isolation of the Inner Station allows him to shed the constraints of his culture. He discovers that in the absence of a police force, his technological superiority (guns) and his rhetorical brilliance allow him to become a god to the locals. He does not just rule; he presides over "unspeakable rites" (84). The outpost reveals that Kurtz's morality was never intrinsic; it was merely a habit of his environment. Once the environment changed, the morality evaporated only to be replaced by a megalomaniacal will to power. Just like an omniscient deity, he wishes to exert his power over the natives of the place—a wish that can be discerned without doubt in the post-scriptum that he adds at the end of his report, "Exterminate all the brutes!" (84) Kurtz's unbridled reversion to atavism echoes in Freud's words:

> In the realm of the mind…what is primitive is so commonly preserved alongside the transformed version which has arisen from it that it is unnecessary to give instances and evidence. When this happens, it is usually in consequence of divergence in development: one portion (in the quantitative sense) of an attitude or an instinctual impulse has remained unaltered, while another portion has gone further development. (*Civilization and its Discontents* 141)

However, Kurtz does not only hide the truth about his primitive self from himself, but thrives among the natives as an embodiment of suprahuman agency. Therefore, when Marlow says

that after reading the report written by Kurtz he felt a "notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence" (84), it only reinforces the realisation that Kurtz, in assuming the role of a benefactor of the 'savage' native, reveals himself to be the ultimate impostor—one masquerading as someone next to God.

Majid, the protagonist of Waliullah's *Lalsalu*, is a fascinating counterpart to Kurtz, albeit operating on a micro-scale and in a different geopolitical space. Majid arrives in Mohabbatnagar not as a conqueror with guns, but as a destitute wanderer with a prayer cap. Driven by hunger rather than imperial ambition, he stumbles upon a neglected grave in the jungle. In a moment of improvisational genius, he claims it is the shrine of a high saint and berates the villagers for their negligence. Like Kurtz, Majid realizes that the isolation of the villagers makes them vulnerable to a new narrative. He constructs a theocracy with himself at the center. He uses the fear of the supernatural—the wrath of the Saint—much like Kurtz uses the 'thunder and lightning' embodied by his firepower. Both men realise that the outpost is a place where history can be rewritten; Kurtz, therefore, writes himself as a deity, while Majid writes himself as a divinely appointed caretaker. Using the fear of afterlife which is believed to be at the core of Islamic religious faith, Majid fortifies his stature as a guarantor of entry to heaven for the villagers, although he himself does not believe in it. The fact that Majid chooses religion to be his armour to gain both power and authority is significant, for religion is an intrinsic aspect of civilised society. As C.N. Shankar Rao observes:

> The phenomenon of religion attracted the attention of the sociologists because of its great human importance. No society is free from the influence of religion. In established societies, religion is one of the most important institutional structures making up the total social system. A special branch of sociology has emerged in order to analyze the religious behaviour of men from a sociological point of view. (35)

The nature of their imposture differs in scope but not in essence. Kurtz's imposture is tragic and violent; he believes his own lie, or at least, becomes consumed by it. Majid's imposture is cynical and existential; he knows it is a lie. He cleans the grave, trims the bushes, and lights the candles, all the while knowing that the bones beneath—if there are any—belong to nobody special. Yet, the dynamic of the outpost dictates that the lie is more powerful than the truth. In the isolated village, Majid is the sole arbiter of reality. As Conrad writes of Kurtz, "He had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone" (112). Majid, too, kicks himself loose of his past, going on to float in a bubble of his own fabrication.

Men and their Mission: The Colonisation of the Mind

It is crucial to recognise that the 'isolated outpost' allows for a specific form of colonisation. While Conrad deals with literal imperialism, Waliullah deals with the colonisation of the mind. In *Heart of Darkness*, the outpost is the physical manifestation of the imperial drive to extract resources (ivory) at the cost of humanity. But in *Lalsalu*, the resource being extracted is not ivory; it is the villagers' submission and their rice. Majid colonises the village of Mohabbatnagar just as effectively as any European administrator. He imposes a foreign dialect (his Noakhali accent vs. their local dialect), a foreign rigorousness of religion (Wahabi-influenced orthodoxy vs. their syncretic folk beliefs), and a tax system (donations to the shrine). The outpost facilitates this because there is no competing narrative. When Kurtz ends up denouncing the rescue missions repeatedly attempted to save him and frantically emphasizes, "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my…" (Conrad 91) , the aspect of narcissism ruling the mind of the colonizer becomes evident. In this respect, once again, Freud becomes worth referring to: "Loving oneself is the libidinal compliment to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation" (*On Narcissism* 9).

On the other hand, Majid preys on the 'fear of God' to colonise the minds of the vulnerable villagers. In this respect we may cite what R.H. Pfeiffer's observation: "The expression 'fear of God' for religion is very significant; in early times it must have expressed the essence of religion, or atleast its most important element" (42). 'Fear' in general is a dominant factor in controlling the lives and narrative of religion in Lalsalu. Syed Akram Hossain has shown that Waliullah has used the word 'fear' (translated into Bengali as 'bhoy') and words related to 'fear' seventy times. Fatema-Tuz-Zohra observes:

> The fact that the villagers of Mohabbatnagar start believing in the sanctity of a random grave as the sacred shrine of Modasser Pir when Majid says so is because their lives are dominated by the 'fear' of sin. Since people usually show respect to shrines because of religious reasons, they fear the person resting under the shrine. They believe that because Modasser Pir is a representative of God, he is capable of supernatural powers. And because Majid is a caretaker of the shrine, he probably has some degree of the same power as well. (63)

In a city, Majid would have been one among thousands of clerics; in Mohabbatnagar, he is the Vicar of God. In a European city, Kurtz would have been a journalist or a musician; in the Congo, he is a titan. The isolation eliminates competition. At the same time, it creates a monopoly on truth. Both authors suggest that the 'Great Man' theory of history is often just a trick of geography; a man is only a giant because he stands among those he has forced to their knees.

The Crisis of Conscience: The Horror vs. The Fear

Where Conrad and Waliullah diverge—and where their comparison yields the most fertile philosophical fruit—is in the psychological toll this imposture takes on the protagonist. The outpost is a pressure cooker, and eventually, the seal breaks. For Conrad, the breakdown is

often explosive and centered on the realisation of intrinsic evil—the 'shadow line' where a man realises he is capable of anything. Kurtz's final cry, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 118) is a judgment on his own soul and the hollow civilisation that produced him. Kurtz's way of dealing with life's impossible tasks resonates with Dostoevsky's words:

> He will launch a curse upon the world as only man can curse…it may be his curse alone through which he will attain his object – that is, convince himself that he is a man and not a piano key! If you say that all this too, can be calculated and tabulated – chaos and darkness and curses, so that the mere possibility of calculating it all beforehand will stop it all, and reason will reassert itself – then man would purposely go mad in order to be rid of reason and gain his point! I believe in it, I answer for it, for the whole work of man seems to consist in nothing but proving to himslef every minute that he is a man and not a piano key! It may be at the cost of his skin, it may be by cannibalism! (151)

The isolation stripped Kurtz naked, and he could not bear the sight of himself. In *Lord Jim*, the outpost in Patusan initially offers Jim a chance at redemption, a place to hide from his past cowardice. He becomes "Tuan Jim" (Lord Jim). But the isolation is fragile. When the outside world (in the form of the pirate Brown) breaches the outpost, Jim's constructed reality collapses. The Conradian protagonist usually dies or is destroyed when the illusion of the outpost is punctured by reality.

On the other hand, Waliullah's characters face a subtler, more nauseating disintegration, reminiscent of Sartre or Camus. In *Lalsalu*, Majid does not scream; he lives in a state of perpetual, low-level anxiety. He is haunted not by a moral judgment, but by the fear of exposure. Bertrand Russell observes in this regard:

> Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. […]Fear is the basis of the whole thing –fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of

> cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if crulety and religion go hand-in hand. ("Why I am not a Christian")

Every stranger who enters the village is a threat; every question asked by a villager is a potential crack in his fortress. His outpost is a prison of his own making. He yearns for a wife, for connection, but he cannot connect because he cannot be known—for to be known is to be revealed as a fraud. He marries Rahima, the widow and succeeds in earning her complete surrender as a wife. Rahima, the author reveals, fears religion and her husband on the same scale. It is however, when Majid marries the second time (a young girl named Jamila), that his carefully created and crafted narrative of religious supremacy is threatened and turned upside down. Jamila becomes what Majid fears and cannot afford to accept—a source of resistance to his established authority. This theme is further explored in Waliullah's *Chander Amabasya*. Here, the protagonist is not the impostor, but the witness—a young, educated teacher named Aref Ali. He discovers a crime committed by the feudal lord of the isolated village. The outpost's isolation creates a moral paralysis. There are no police to call; the feudal lord is the law. Aref Ali knows the truth, but the crushing weight of the village's hierarchy and his own isolation silence him. Unlike Conrad's Marlow, who tells the story of Kurtz to purge himself of it, Aref Ali swallows the story. He disintegrates inward.

The difference in reaction highlights the cultural contexts of the authors. Conrad's characters are tragic heroes in the Greek sense; their fall is dramatic and loud. Waliullah's characters are anti-heroes of the modern, bureaucratic age; their fall is quiet, marked by compromise, rationalisation, and the slow but inevitable rot of the soul.

"The Last Thing He Said": The Failure of Language

A final, critical element of the isolated outpost in both Conrad and Waliullah is the failure of language to convey truth. In the outpost, words become tools of control rather than vehicles of

communication. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is defined by his voice. "The man presented himself as a voice", Marlow recounts (Conrad 79). Kurtz creates a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, filled with "burning noble words", but it ends with the scrawled postscript: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (84) The isolation reveals that the high language of civilisation is a sham covering primal violence. Also, on a deeper level, Kurtz's failure to articulate the workings of his inner self by borrowing the language that civilization had taught him can be analysed from Lacanian psychoanalytical point of view. Jacques Lacan observes that the psychological growth of an infant goes through three stages/realms in order to arrive at completion – the 'imaginary', the 'symbolic' and the 'real'. While the 'imaginary' is the stage which is dominated by images , the 'symbolic' is the realm of words, of language. He says that the 'imaginary' realm is intrinsically linked with the formation of ego. The order of the 'imaginary' is marked by the fundamental narcissism by which the human subject creates fantasy images of both himself and his ideal object of desire. The subject in this order internalises the ideal and is not able to separate or perceive its existence outside the internalised image of a consistent and coherent self (Homer 30). Kurtz is a child of this 'imaginary' realm and he fails to come out of it to step into the realm of the 'symbolic', which is the reason why he fails to use language for the proper communication of his condition. Kurtz's language is broken, incomplete and inadequate.

On the other hand, Majid survives by constantly articulating his opinions and his narrative of religious fraud. He belongs to the Lacanian realm of the 'symbolic' which is a social order ruled by linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological hegemony and the acceptence of the law. However, no matter how much he articulates, he can never truly mean/communicate anything truly substantial. In his personal space, Majid remains as isolated and severed from any meaningful connection as Kurtz because all his communications is based on lies. Majid uses Arabic prayers that neither he nor the

villagers fully understand. The language is performative. He chants to intimidate, to mesmerize, and to silence. When he enters the village, he scolds them in a language that is effectively gibberish to them, but the tone of authority is what matters. In the isolated outpost, meaning is severed from language. Words are merely sounds used to signal dominance. Both authors demonstrate that when a community is cut off from the wider world, language ceases to be a dialogue and becomes a monologue of power.

Conclusion

The 'isolated outpost' in the fiction of Joseph Conrad and Syed Waliullah is more than a plot device; it is a profound philosophical argument. By removing their characters from the safety of the collective, both authors expose the terrifying fragility of the individual self. Conrad uses the outpost to show us the beast beneath the skin of the civilised man—the violence that erupts when the restraints of law are removed. Waliullah uses the outpost to show us the fraud beneath the skin of the pious man—the elaborate lies we construct to survive when we are powerless. Ultimately, the tragedy of the outpost is not that the protagonists are lost in the wilderness. The tragedy is that they find exactly what they were looking for: a place where they could be gods. And in becoming gods, they lose their humanity. The whispering darkness of the African jungle and the silent barrenness of the Bengal countryside beget the same lesson: man is not liberated by the freedom offered by uninterrupted isolation—he is swallowed by it. The outpost only shows him a face of his own—one that he would be too afraid to acknowledge in the civilised world.

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