

## Conrad's Misrepresentation and Ambivalence in "An Outpost of Progress"

Mohammad Abdullah Al Matarneh<sup>1</sup>

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This study centers on Conrad's colonial experience and conscious misrepresentation of a colonized native in "An Outpost of Progress" (1897), in a Belgian colony – established in a Dark Continent. As Conrad's short fiction is written during the period of imperialism, the study examines the characters and events in relation to natives and the non-natives that are depicted in the text. Albeit to what degree Conrad creates spaces for the interaction of other voices in his text, marginalized voices are given chances to interact and challenge the dominant authorial voice and ideology. To achieve this, Said's and Homi Bhabha's concepts of postcolonial studies are used as a framework for this study. The study finds that Conrad's text main participant is the White characters while the colonized natives play a secondary role; therefore, readers perceive the fictional world through the Eurocentric eyes.

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### 1.1 Introduction

Many researches and studies have been carried out on Joseph Conrad, especially the works written on Asian and African experiences. Many regard him as a white racist because of his attitude towards his colonial themes and his negative portrayal of the indigenous communities. On the other hand, many critics tend to be sympathetic to his cause and understand the moral isolation of the white masters. This article tackles the misrepresentation and ambivalent nature of Conrad's short fiction *An Outpost of Progress*. Critic such as Jocelyn Baines (1960) who has conducted a research into his early life revealed that Conrad often used his own experiences as a sailor at sea and his sojourn to distance exotic lands as data for his novels. Also he finds that Conrad had used some books as a source material for his colonial fiction. Another study by David Murray (1987) on *Heart of Darkness* reveals in his analysis that dialogue between the white colonizers and the African colonized is always blocked off because the latter is seen as objects instead of subjects. He attributes this lack of dialogism to historical factors as whatever knowledge Conrad and other white anthropologists have about the colonized were attained from objective sources and not from the natives themselves (129).

James M. Johnson (1995) reveals in his doctoral dissertation how certain racist attitudes are uncritically reproduced in a number of Conrad's texts namely *Almayer's Folly* (1895), *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *the Nigger of the "narcissus"* (1897), *An Outpost of Progress* (1897), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and *Lord Jim* (1900). Conrad's racial views, he discovers, show an affinity with those views recognized by Victorian evolutionary anthropology. Similarly, Anthony Lopez Get (2010) demonstrates that "the military and economic power of the Empire gave them the power to invade, colonize" (58) exploit the rich natural sources of the new territories and offer a new market for their industrial products. This is the real agenda behind the white colonialism. Johnson supports the notion that the ideological domination over weaker countries is "more effective and less expensive" (59) than the military one, as the ideological domination makes the colonized people not only believe they are inferior but they make their dependency fully on the Empire in all sphere of life, economically, culturally .... etc. Consequently, they think that they are part of the center in a hop of a better future (59).

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<sup>1</sup> Tafilah Technical University, Faculty of Arts, English Department, P.O. Box 179, Tafila 66110, Jordan  
E-mail: [Matarneh66@yahoo.com](mailto:Matarneh66@yahoo.com)

The most important area of domination according to Ngugi 1986 is “the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world” (16). Colonialism denigrates other people culture, Language, history, religion and etc.

Seemingly, texts that are constituted by a colonialist discourse tend to share similar characteristics. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) argues that both literary and non-literary works about the “Other” tend to share similar effect (177). He elaborates by saying that these texts are textually similar as they construct the Orient as the Other, securing them in powerless object positions while reserving the more powerful subject positions for the westerners. These texts share similar features in the sense that they dehumanize the Other by making generalizations and valorized statements about them, securing them in an unchanging past or present tense, and “containing the Orient and finally representing it or speaking in its behalf”. It further negates their subjectivity by denying them subject positions and not allowing them to make personal statements (108). According to Said, western writers tend to lay emphasis on the “Difference” between races in order that the European behavior be perceived as the norm; and that the Other is seen as a stranger for that is one way in which Europe can exert its superiority (111). This process of Othering can also be achieved by consigning the such as to “primitive”, “Backwards”, “Developing”, “Savages” ... (89). The other rarely depicted as full-bodied individuals. On the other hands, Brantlinger (1988) demonstrates that the most pervasive of those Eurocentric ideas concern their supremacy as a race, as standard bearers for others to follow, and their role as a savior, as an “enlightened worker” who is morally indulged to bring civilization to the inferior races in the Dark Continent. Bringing civilization to the natives meant converting the natives, not just to Christianity but as “productive labour” for the industries in the imperial metropolis (25).

Said does not take into consideration the idea of resistance in his analysis of Orientalist texts as he makes the assumption that the discourse of Orientalism structures the orientalist texts. On the other side, Hulme (1986) claims that there are many other discourses that can be located in colonialist texts since texts are not unitary but heterogeneous entities. Though Orientalist texts tend to construct the other as inferior and backward, these texts are not unified, as Said suggests, because there are other features in these texts that function to context or reinforce the dominant discourses. Moreover, not every colonialist text would respond to or negotiate with the discursive constraints in a similar manner.

## 1.2 Analysis and discussion

In this section, the researcher examines to what extent such practices are being reproduced in Conrad's text “An outpost of progress” (1897)? Is there a dominant voice or discourse in the text? How does the narrator evaluate and represent such voices and discourses? Once the empire is set in motion, people from other continents who are darker-skinned and culturally different from the European, are homogenized as one group and labelled as savages or primitive tribes. Once the labelling is settled, undesirable traits and qualities are allocated to them. In the story, the narrator describes Makola's wife negatively, as “a Negress from Loanda, very large and very noisy” (611). Makola portrayal how he betrays his own people as he sells them off into slavery for the sake of getting more ivory. In reality he adapted this kind of manner from the White colonizers.

He adds that the place is “different” because the white man is “energetic artist dies of fever in the just unfinished house” (610). Clearly, this representation brings what Said's orientalism (1978) states:

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient, translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kind of images, themes, motifs, that circulate in his text... all of which adds up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient and finally representing it or speaking in its behalf (20).

Even the land is described as being harsh, source of destructions “Evil Spirit that ruled the lands under the equator” (610). The White is projected to be far more superior and powerful than the native. The narrator legitimizes the unequal power relationship between the natives and Europeans. Africans are degraded as inferior being, “fine animals” (615) or “funny brutes” (614) who would receive some of the “rubbish” stocked in the store in exchange for the ivory. Albeit the native depicted and misrepresented as a savage community, “they were naked, glossy black, ornamented with snowy shells and glistening brass wire, perfect of lim. They made an uncouth babbling noise when they spoke” (614). Another native man “Gobla” from the neighboring villages “was a gray-headed savage” (616), but it appears that the white colonizers rely and depend on him for their food.

The veil of colonization is removed out when Carlier suggests that “exterminating” (615) the indigenous people is a necessary part of the civilizing process. Throughout the entire story the colonizers, Kayerts and Carlier, ironically think they are part of the so-called white heroes who are supposed to help and civilize the dark continents. They fantasize one day their names will be blended as “the first civilized men to live in this spot” (616). On contrary, they bring undesirable outcomes while seeking progress; and that the culture they view as backward and uncivilized is perhaps more practical than the one they come from. At the end, both met their disastrous death and become a victim of colonial ideology.

### 1.3 Conrad’s Colonial Ambivalence

The issue of imperialism is also discussed by Benita Parry (1983) in her book “Conrad and imperialism”. Parry is of the view that Conrad’s works abound in contradictory meanings. Conrad, to Parry, is ambivalent towards imperialism. This is because while celebrating the virtues of service and patriotism, she finds that he also rebukes the moral justifications for imperialism. In exploration of Conrad’s field of discourse, he appears to contest the discourse of racial superiority. His white characters, Kayerts and Carlier, are portrayed as weak and irresolute, easily defeated by the natives such as Makola, as he is in charge of the trade and able to speak Western languages along with his native people. These tools made him “the civilized negger”; the European is not the “fittest” one after all. The two men could only survive as long as Gobilas’s people took care of them. Because of their moral failure, concerning their role in the slave trade, this aid stops. For this reason, their physical health deteriorated. They both lose their civilized manners “Come! Out with that sugar you stingy old slave-dealer” (6011) and unfortunately, they both died. They have in all ways failed in their mission of colonizing.

The two white men bedrooms described as untidy “torn wearing apparel, old boots; all the things dirty, and all the things broken ...etc.” (608). Even the opening part of the story, the description of the two white men creates laughter for the reader as when:

“There were two white men in charge of the trading station. Kayerts, the chief, was short and fat; Carlier, the assistant, was tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a long pair of thin legs. (608)

Here the white characters, do not fulfil one’s idea of the idealized male colonial hero. May be, their fallibility and moral bankruptcy provide Conrad with a means to mock the white man’s civilizing zeal and the idea that he is much more superior to the native. Conrad’s lack of confidence in the imperial project reflects his uncertainty about the discourse of racial superiority as championed by the “apologists for aggressive imperialism” (Watts, 86). It appears as though Conrad is making an effort to redistribute power relations between the colonizers and colonized. The center sends a second class people who are illegible and invaluable for the task in an uncivilized land. “They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals” (611). In contrast, the native Makolais described as a black educated African. This reminds me of what Street (1975) had said, “that friendship between the races is difficult and only possible if a native shows the qualities of an English gentleman” (55). Makola for example “spoke English and French with a warbling accent, wrote a beautiful hand, and understood book keeping” (611). The narrator gives Makola a high position and hierarchy with superiority in contrast to the white:

“Gobila’s manner was paternal, and he seemed really to love all white men ... In consequence of that friendship the women of Gobila’s village walked in single file through the reedy grass, bringing every morning to the station, fowls, and sweet potatoes, and palm wine, and sometimes, a goat. (612)

The quotation above reveals a sense of ambiguity and/or uncertainty over how the native is represented. As Bhabha 1994 claims, “through stereotypes, the colonial Self expresses ambivalence about the Other, since they are perceived both as an object of derision and as an object of desire” (82). Gobila is described as a wise lovable native. In most realist text, as Mills 1992 demonstrates, there is a hierarchy of voices or discourses; and the voices or discourses occupying the position of truth is the one which a reader wants to identify her/himself with. (190)

It is worth mentioning that, Conrad does attempt to contest hegemonic practices and the conventions of colonialist discourse by improving the representation of natives such as Makola. On the other hand, by providing a critique of certain white characters such as Kayerts and Carlier, he depicted them in individual cases as having their own peculiarities. It can be concluded that Conrad criticizes colonialism by displaying how colonialism affects both the natives and colonizers in an immoral way.

## 1.4 Conclusion

In the analysis of “An Outpost of progress”, Conrad reveals and sustains unequal relations of power between Orientals and Occidentals, the colonized and the colonizer, and certain conventions and representation practices are reproduced by Conrad to portray his characters. The analysis made attempts to find out to what extent control is exercised by narrators on the various characters, the natives, in particular. Nevertheless, his text endeavors to contest colonialist discourse and its conventions when he portrays his white protagonists such as Kayerts, the chief, and Carlier, his assistant, as moral failures and by allowing unsavoury views about them to pass through uncensored. Moreover, he appears to challenge colonialist discourse practices when he grants marginalized voices the occasion to foreground their views and perspectives by challenging the dominant discourse of the Empire. Albeit, the analysis shows that Conrad seems to be rather ambivalent about imperialism and colonialism; however, the discourses of Eurocentrism, Othering and racism appear to undercut many of his implied criticism about the empire and colonialism.

## Work Citation

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