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# COMMERCIAL CONVERSATIONS AND "THAT GLIMPSE OF TRUTH FOR WHICH YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN TO ASK": THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN FICTION OF JOSEPH CONRAD AND PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER

**JOHN MARTIN MILLER**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of English Studies
Durham University

Lutry, Switzerland, February 2025

In memory of my parents, ‘Molly’ and ‘Dusty’ Miller, who gave me the opportunity to be the first member of our family to attend university, and with love and gratitude to Ying and Sophie for your unwavering encouragement and support.

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. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your desserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm – all you demand; and, perhaps also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

Conrad, *The Narcissus* (1897).

For those who have been forgotten, deliberately or otherwise.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Footsteps*. Vol 3. *The Buru Quartet* (1975-88).

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## Objectives

> Well! Well! It's only those who do nothing that make no mistakes, I suppose. But it's hard. Hard.
>
> Conrad, *The Outcast of the Islands* (1896).[1]

> It is the critic's job to provide resistance to theory.
>
> Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983).[2]

This thesis is the product of a life-long journey. It is also the culmination of a fifty-year education, the traditional element of which concluded in graduation from Durham University in 1979. That year is now remembered as one of discontinuity and upheaval marked by the "Winter of Discontent" during the final months of the Callaghan-led Labour government and the advent of what was to become known as "Thatcherism". My formal academic studies were not to resume again until 2021.

In the intervening years my wanderings have involved a forty-year international business career, with seventeen of those years being spent in the Southeast Asian nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines. It might be said that I have been following in Conrad's footsteps. His novels have been my constant companions. With the passage of time, I have come to appreciate that they have often also been my guides.

My objectives in writing this thesis are threefold:

[1] Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands,* p. 134.
[2] Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1983), p. 242.

First, to examine the essential roles played by globalisation, commerce and the extractive industries in Conrad's Asian fiction, demonstrating how a reading of these works through the lens of business underpins their enduring relevance. I use the term "extractive industries" in its broader sense, to encompass not only mining operations but all forms of industry that seeks to extract value, particularly from states which lie beyond what might be defined as a company's home territory.

Secondly, to suggest that such a reading of the major Asian novels, in particular *Almayer's Folly*, *Lord Jim* and *Victory*, reveals an author who was both the father of the modern novel while also being a captive of his times, subject to the cultural and intellectual biases of the day.

Thirdly, to demonstrate how Conrad's Asian novels served as a personal call to action and how lived experience has been essential to an evolving critical appreciation of his canon.

During my research for the project, I have engaged with the wide range of critical responses that Conrad's novels provoked during his life, and since his death in 1924. In the context of the second objective, I draw upon the *Buru Quartet* by the eminent Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) as a counterpoint to Conrad's works, particularly as Pramoedya's four novels serve to reveal that "glimpse of the truth" for which Conrad himself perhaps forgot to ask. I have also reflected upon my own experiences of living and working in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Central Europe and on how these experiences have informed my evolving relationship with Conrad's oeuvre.

The thesis has been conducted by research undertaken over the course of the last two and a half years. For much of that time the Coronavirus prevented travel. Hence, after a lifetime spent aboard aeroplanes, I have had the benefit of taking a purely intellectual journey, one which would not

have been possible without the invaluable support and guidance of Professor Peter Garratt, Professor Simon James and Dr Fraser Riddell of Durham University. Hopefully, the thesis has also benefited from the learning derived from four decades of engagement in countries where the impact of globalisation, driven by the often-unpredictable forces of commerce, has been most profoundly felt.

**Sources and Footnotes**

**General**

All footnotes are numbered on a chapter-by-chapter basis.

The principles of the MHRA Style Guide (3rd Edition) have been observed throughout, with one important exception. The name of the Indonesia author Pramoedya Ananta Toer is given as Pramoedya, in the body of the text and in the abbreviated footnotes. This is in line with the traditional naming practice of Indonesia, where a person is known by their first given name. In the Bibliography his name appears as Toer, Pramoedya Ananta.

**Primary Sources**

In the chapters which focus specifically upon *Almayer's Folly, Lord Jim* and *Victory* (chapters four, five and six), page references from the relevant academic Primary Source are noted parenthetically. General references to all other Primary Sources are noted using an abbreviated format in the footnotes where a specific page is referenced.

In chapter seven, which deals with the four novels which comprise the *Buru Quartet* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, each academic text is cited in full in the footnotes when first referenced. Thereafter, the individual novels are cited in abbreviated format in the footnotes when specific pages are

referenced. Likewise, all other Primary Sources are noted using an abbreviated format in the footnotes when a specific page is referenced.

In all other chapters the Primary Sources are cited in abbreviated format as footnotes when specific pages are referenced.

The following editions of texts by Joseph Conrad are cited as Primary Sources:

*A Personal Record,* ed. by Zdzisław Najder and J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

*Almayer's Folly*, ed. by David Leon Higdon and Floyd Eugene Eddleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

*An Outcast of the Islands,* ed. by J. H. Stape (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

*Chance,* ed. by Martin Ray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

*The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, *Vol. 1: 1861-1897*, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

*The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, *Vol. 5: 1912-1916*, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

*The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, *Vol. 7: 1920-1922*, ed. by Laurence Davies and J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

*The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, *Vol. 8: 1923-1924*, ed. by Laurence Davies and Gene M. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

*The End of the Tether and Other Tales,* ed. by Philip Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

*Heart of Darkness and Other Tales,* ed. by Cedric Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

*The Lagoon,* ed. by William Atkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

*Lord Jim*, ed. by Jacques Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

*The Narcissus*, ed. by Jacques Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

*Nostromo,* ed. by Jacques Berthoud and Mara Kalnins (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2009).

*Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent Collected Edition, 1945-55).

*Notes on my Books* (New York: Doubleday, Page Company, 1920).

*The Rescue*: *A Romance of the Shallows* (London: Penguin, 1978).

*The Secret Agent*, ed. by John Lyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

*The Shadow Line*, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

*Typhoon,* ed. by Cedric Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

*Under Western Eyes*, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorne, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

*Victory*, ed. by Jacques Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

The following editions of texts by Pramoedya Ananta Toer are cited as Primary Sources:

*The Buru Quartet*, ed. and trans. by Maxwell Ronald Lane (London: Penguin, 1996).

*Footsteps*, ed. and trans. by Maxwell Ronald Lane (London: Penguin, 1996).

*House of Glass,* ed. and trans. by Maxwell Ronald Lane (London: Penguin, 1992).

*This Earth of Mankind*, ed. and trans. by Maxwell Ronald Lane (London: Penguin, 1980).

**Secondary Sources**

Secondary Sources are cited in full as footnotes on first reference; thereafter any further references are rendered in abbreviated format.

## Chapter Two: Structure

The structure I have adopted for the organisation of this thesis is informed by the convergence of several emerging themes in literary criticism. These range from recent writing on the general field of criticism, to the evolving thinking on the definitions of Modernism, through to contemporary critical engagement with Conrad's works. I will comment briefly upon on these three areas.

In her writing on the role and practice of literary criticism, Rita Felski advocates a broad engagement between reader and author.[1] She argues that both are in a constant dialogue with each other, the reader's evolving response to a work being influenced by, and mediated through, the many facets of their own lived experience. Consequently, the meaning or understanding of a work will likely change over time as the reader matures and accrues experience.

Conrad has long been regarded as being at the vanguard of Modernist writing. His employment of unreliable narrators, disconcerting time shifts and undercutting irony are strong evidence in support of this contention. Christopher GoGwilt has built upon this thinking to identify Conrad as lying at the beginning of an evolving continuum in Modernist writing.[2] This can be traced from *fin-de-siècle* works through to post-colonial writing and authors such as Indonesia's Pramoedya Ananta Toer. This broadening international perspective prompts the realisation that there were other important voices that had been left unheard, obscured perhaps by a strong Western bias in much literary discourse.

[1] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
[2] Christopher GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Meanwhile, journal articles by critics such as Michael Tondre have stimulated increasing interest in Conrad's preoccupation with the topics of globalisation, trade and the extractive industries.[3] Jason W. Moore has highlighted how these processes, networks and practices have increasingly exerted an influence upon our present-day lives in the economic, the cultural and, perhaps most importantly, the environmental realms.[4]

This thesis represents the triangulation point at which these themes met for me at a personal level. Through serendipity, I have lived a peripatetic life that has taken me on a journey which has uncannily traced that of Conrad as he (and I) moved through the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Switzerland. The author was the catalyst at the start of my odyssey and has been a constant companion in the nine different countries where I have lived and worked. Along the way our relationship has developed, changed and deepened. It has been a voyage driven by my own involvement in modern-day multi-national trade and commerce. It has also been one which led to my marriage into a Chinese-Malaysian family and the birth of my daughter Sophie Wei-san, now a young woman at home in several diverse cultures, destined to make her way in a globalised world.

In an attempt to synthesise these component themes, I commence this thesis by providing in chapter three an analysis of the major periods of Conradian critical thinking, encompassing his initial reception and the years since his death. During the latter period he has on occasions receded from view, only to re-emerge in a new and often more revealing light. This has been particularly true at times of significant social or political discontinuity. The Review of Literature foregrounds

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[3] Michael Tondre, 'Conrad's Carbon Imaginary: Oil, Imperialism and the Victorian Petro-archive', *Victorian Literature and Culture,* 48.1 (2020), 57-90.
[4] Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).

the emerging preoccupation in the critical literature with ideas related to trade and industry, an approach which has provided new purchase on Conrad's writing and which reveals his continuing relevance in this latest age of uncertainty. The chapter also considers Conrad's place in Modernist writing, drawing attention to more recent post-colonial and feminist critical approaches, as well as work that has focused on canonical Modernism's engagement with Asian cultures.

The Review of Literature is followed by the core chapters of the thesis, which engage with the three major novels from Conrad's Asia collection: firstly, his debut work *Almayer's Folly*; then the novel which is widely regarded as one of his pre-eminent works, *Lord Jim*; and lastly *Victory,* arguably the most radical and misunderstood of the books set in the Malay Archipelago. I will briefly summarize the objectives of each of these chapters in turn.

In chapter four, entitled 'Emerging themes, devices and potential problems', I examine how *Almayer's Folly* serves as a statement of intent, laying out the territory, both figuratively and literally, with which Conrad will engage throughout the Asian novels. I examine examples of the devices and imagery he will go on to deploy and elaborate upon in *Lord Jim* and *Victory*. I demonstrate how trade and the desire to extract wealth determines the lives of the protagonists. I also identify potentially problematic issues that are examined in finer detail in chapter seven, which deals with the work of Pramoedya. In this later chapter I use Pramoedya's tetralogy, the *Buru Quartet*, as a counterpoint to shed further light on the Conrad novels.

The central chapter in the review of Conrad's three major Asian novels is entitled 'The Commerce of Human Relationships' and concerns *Lord Jim*. This chapter (five) comprises three elements: the first of these interrogates how trade and commercial legal practices impinged at the most personal level, in the context of family life as manifest in the institution of concubinage. The second deals with the conflicted and problematic nature of Jim and Stein's relationship with the practice of

business, trade and the natural environment. The third pulls back to provide a broader understanding of how aspects of the commercial world portrayed in the novel live on in the age of the Western-owned multi-national.

In chapter six, under the title of 'Commodities, Character and Contradictions', I present *Victory* as the fullest realisation of Conrad's vision of the nexus between the commercial and the deeply personal. In no other Conrad novel set in Asia do these two worlds elide more dramatically, providing the clearest expression of Conrad's profoundly pessimistic vision of the nature of the human condition.

The rationale for selecting these three particular novels from the total of six (plus over a dozen short stories) that Conrad set in Southeast Asia has been informed by what the progression of these works reveals about the changing nature of western colonial engagement with the practice of trade and industry in Asia. From *Almayer's Folly*, published in 1895, to *Victory* published in 1915, we see the transition from the potentially peripatetic trader, Almayer, to the static rooted mine manager, Heyst. Situated between these two novels is *Lord Jim*, published in 1900, in which we encounter Jim and Stein, both of whom are employed in a variety of business activities, ranging from trading, through commercial agriculture to the harvesting of guano. In this respect *Lord Jim* marks the transition point between the different forms of Western commercial colonialism. Significantly, with each step on the continuum, the lead character, by dint of the business in which he is engaged, becomes further embedded in the geography to which he believes he has escaped.

The examination of the three Conrad novels in chapters four, five and six is then juxtaposed with an exploration of Pramoedya's *Buru Quartet* in chapter seven. The purpose of this chapter is to examine my hypothesis that there may have been a perspective on the experience of commercial colonization which Conrad had failed to fully capture. Here, I explore the contradictions that

Pramoedya's works invite us to confront. I also draw upon the works of Fanon and Bhabha to suggest that ownership of the colonial narrative ultimately lies beyond that of Conrad's Western characters.[5]

The detailed analysis of the selected Conrad and Pramoedya texts leads into chapter eight, which deals with my own personal journey with Conrad. My aim is to demonstrate Felski's work *in action* and to explain how my own experience has informed my changing understanding of and engagement with Conrad's texts.

In chapter nine I underscore the central place of trade and wealth extraction in Conrad's exploration of the commercial colonial experience, the importance of his contribution to Modernism and the relationship between his works and those of Pramoedya in providing the present-day reader with that elusive glimpse of the truth to which he gestures in his introduction to the *Narcissus*. I conclude in chapter ten on a personal note demonstrating how Conrad's works continue to resonate down through the decades, reminding us to question our understanding of the nature of that precious commodity for which we may also "have forgotten to ask".

[5] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. by Richard Philicox (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1952); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994).

## Chapter Three: Conrad Criticism - A Review of Literature

> The meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as glow brings out a haze.
>
> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899).[1]

> Theory is a cold and lying tombstone of departed truth.
>
> Conrad, Letter to Edward Garnet, 15 March 1895.[2]

The comment of the framing narrator in *Heart of Darkness* on the nature of Marlow's storytelling technique could equally well have been a critique of Conrad's own approach. As Mallios points out, it underscores the important role to be played by the reader in fathoming what lies within a Conradian tale.[3] This is an aspect of Conrad's books to which the author himself drew attention when he remarked to his friend R. B. Cunninghame Graham on 5 August 1897: "One writes only half the book; the other half is with the reader".[4]

The primary purpose of this chapter is to review how Conrad's critical reception has evolved from the times in which he wrote through the hundred years which have elapsed since his death. It explores how the ambiguity of his work has fuelled the diverse range of responses they have elicited. In particular, it foregrounds the recent preoccupations of Conradian literary criticism with its emphasis upon the part played by his treatment of the themes of globalisation, commerce and the extractive industries. Using my own life's journey working in multinational business, my over-

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[1] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales,* p. 105.
[2] Joseph Conrad, *Collected Letters, Vol. 1*, p. 446.
[3] Peter Lancelot Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. by J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 116-31 (p. 116).
[4] Conrad, *Collected Letters*, *Vol. 1*, p. 370.

arching aim is to articulate how Conrad's Asian novels have operated upon me and how my own lived experience has been influenced, informed and changed by my relationship with his oeuvre. In so doing, I will demonstrate the uniquely important dynamic which exists between the reader and the text and how this interplay can influence both parties.

Maya Jasanoff contends that Conrad was the first novelist "to grapple with the ramifications of living in a global world: the moral and material impact of dislocation, the tensions and opportunities of multi-ethnic societies, the disruption wrought by technological change." She goes on to posit that "Conrad believed that people could never actually escape the constraints of forces bigger than themselves".[5] It is perhaps because of the heft and scope of his concerns that few other writers have been subject to such wide swings of interpretation and reception. The range of these oscillations run from perceptions of Conrad as the great prophet of the major challenges to be faced by humankind in the twentieth century (a theme much to the fore in Jasanoff's work), to seeing him as the pioneer of the modern psychological novel. This latter position is argued by Albert J. Guerand, who sees Conrad as charting Western man's inward journey of discovery as he leaves the security of his home country to explore little-known parts of the world.[6] Conrad has been credited with foreseeing the deceptive power of political ideas, the disruptive nature of technological change, the inevitable fall of colonialism, and the dangers of international migration and terrorism. He has also been credited with exploding the myth of the civilising intent of ideologically driven colonialism and the notion of the Victorian hero. In so doing, he introduced his readers to complex, conflicted and flawed characters such as Kaspar Almayer, Lord Jim and Axel Heyst, whose verisimilitude had not previously been encountered in the novels of the day.

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[5] Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (Glasgow: William Collins, 2017), p. 11.
[6] Albert J. Guerand, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

Conrad created for his Western readers a vision of the "exotic East" based upon his own experience as a merchant seaman plying the waters of the South China Seas. This was a very personal, some would argue synthetic, vision, involving the melding of both literary creativity and factual history, with primacy being afforded to the former. For Conrad, fiction and history were both portrayals of negotiable facts and as such were in a constant dynamic dialogue with each other. As he writes in his essay on Henry James:

> Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents and the reading of print and handwriting – on second-hand impression. Thus fiction is *nearer* truth [emphasis added]. But let that pass. A historian may be an artist, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience.[7]

It is perhaps for this reason that, across the field of Conradian study, his texts have provided such a rich terrain for novelists, historians, theorists and the lay reader to exercise their own intellectual, aesthetic and emotional "muscles" in their search for definitions of that elusive commodity, the truth. It is a commodity that Conrad believed could only ever be weighed in personal and relative terms.

Drawing upon my own research and previous work charting the shifting tides of Conradian criticism, I summarise here the major periods into which Conradian critical thought has been divided. In doing so, I foreground the primary preoccupations and concerns of the leading critics and readers of each period. If there has been a pre-eminent emergent trend or characteristic in the

[7] Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent Collected Edition, 1945-55), p. 17.

thinking that has informed Conradian criticism over the last one hundred years of study, it has been the growing importance attached to the use of theory, be this literary, political of sociological. This characteristic will be used as an entry point for a discussion of the work of Felski and her use of Actor-Network Theory, which she advocates as a means of mediating the dynamic and interactive relationship which she believes exists between the reader and the text.[8]

In what follows, I draw this historical work together in an articulation of the originality of my own thinking about Conrad's Asian novels. This may best be expressed as the importance of living with the works as an integral element of one's own life, understanding how they prompt action, understanding, and both intellectual and emotional development through time. In so doing, this thesis makes the case that the individual and the work engage in a unique symbiotic relationship, one which evolves over the course of a lifetime, enriching and changing both participants. It is a relationship which is influenced by the plethora of experiences and learnings of the reader, at times refracted by theories drawn from various disciplines, but hopefully never the slave to ideology or an unnuanced, binary view of the world. Rather, as in life, it is a relationship which shifts, grows and, as new knowledge is acquired, is constructively critical. It might also be argued that such a view is of piece with Conrad's own belief that the definition of a single objective reality is itself an elusive and possibly futile task.

The breadth of Conrad's concerns makes his works productively responsive to the critical approaches I adopt here, particularly when the reader in question has spent a lifetime engaged in the practice of business in several countries during an era of accelerating change. There is perhaps

[8] Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*.

no better test of the value of a body of work than to be able to demonstrate through experience that it has been both life-changing and life-enhancing.

As already suggested, the reasons for Conrad's enduring but uneven appeal over the years may be found in the fact that he was a writer who took as his raw material the political, commercial and social dislocation of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Conrad adroitly combined examination of this period of change with acute observation of the deeply human qualities of "loneliness, fatality and tragedy, the necessity of illusion, the deceptive nature of language and the inescapability of ideas".[9]

In 1916, Conrad's friend and correspondent J. M. Dent observed to Conrad: "We are witnessing the birth throes of a new world, and you of all men, it seems to me, should be the prophet of its psychology".[10] In spite of Conrad's ironic view of prophecy, Mallios argues it has been during times of historic upheaval and turbulence that his works have come most sharply back into critical and public focus.[11] It has also been at these times of re-engagement that the novels, and the attitudes and values attributed to Conrad, have been subject to the most intense critical scrutiny and re-evaluation. This is perhaps because, at his best Conrad, was always writing about that strange nether world which lies both spatially and temporally between "territories", leading Mallios, to portray him as the bard of the borderlands.[12] Jan Gordon builds on this notion, linking it back to Conrad's Polish roots as he writes:

> The Slavic prefix *po* carries the meaning of "alongside" or next to (*po-land*), a provisional, shadowing *adjacent land*. Even topographically, his characters live on the edge: Lord Jim

[9] Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', p. 117.
[10] Joseph Conrad, *Collected Letters, Vol. 5*, Letter to J. M. Dent, 1916, p. 681.
[11] Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', p. 119.
[12] Peter Lancelot Mallios, *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 151, 359.

deliberating a jump on the *Patna;* Flora de Barral being rescued from suicide at the ledge of a quarry by Captain Anthony in *Chance;* Lena being temporarily rescued by Heyst from the *demi-monde* in *Victory*; or the "drop" which hangs Winnie Verloc.[13]

Mallios identifies the unique combination of radicalism and conservatism which often characterises Conrad's apparent disposition, an attitude of mind which has also helped to attract a broad spectrum of both advocates and detractors.

Terry Collits has defined four major "moments" of critical reception of Conrad's works.[14] Similar points of development and discontinuity have also been identified by Mallios:[15]

- The Original Moment: Britain, Ireland, the United States
- The Humanist Moment: The 1940s and after
- The Postcolonial Moment: From the 1960s to the present.
- The Present Moment: The Twenty-First Century

Here, I deal with each in turn, before elaborating on two further important moments in more recent evaluations of Conrad's work which are central to my own thinking.

**The Original Moment: Britain, Ireland, the United States**

True to the paradoxical nature of Conrad's critical reception, in his adopted country of the United Kingdom the inherent ambiguity of his novels managed to appeal to an eclectic range of audiences: from the conservative supporters of the colonial status quo, particularly as manifest in the British

[13] See the forthcoming essay by Jan B. Gordon, 'The Trope of Partitioned Sovereignties: Shadows of Poland in Conrad' in Spectral Conrad, ed. by Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech, Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives, 34 (Lublin and New York: UMCS Press, Columbia University Press, 2025), p. 80.
[14] Terry Collits, *Post-Colonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 11-20.
[15] Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', p. 119.

model, to those of a more reform-minded persuasion. His most immediate appeal was to those who had enjoyed the discovery of new overseas horizons through the works of Kipling. While Kipling had revealed the complexities of the Indian sub-continent, Conrad opened up the mysteries of the Malay Archipelago. To the conservative or jingoistic mind, he could be read as shedding a critical light upon non-British colonial regimes, such as that of the Dutch, while, by implication, suggesting that the British colonial model might in some way be superior. Novels such as *Almayer's Folly* could be seen as endorsing latent British prejudices concerning the primitive and untrustworthy nature of groups such as the Malays, Arabs and Chinese. By those of a more radical or questioning nature, who were alive to Conrad's deft use of irony, he could be read as casting doubt upon the whole edifice of colonialism and revealing an entirely new world of oppressed people who were struggling as a direct result of the egregious actions of the British (and others).

From a purely commercial perspective, it was his appeal to an American audience which accounted for his elevation to the status of an internationally successful writer, and which brought him the material rewards which, to his frustration and chagrin, had eluded him for so much of his early career as a professional author. Indeed, it was not until the last two years of his life that he was to join the "privileged" 90,000 British tax-payers who were liable to pay "super-tax" on part of their earnings.[16] His breakthrough in the American market was almost certainly related to the United States' entry into the First World War. This whetted the appetite of the American reading public to learn more about that world and arguably accounted for *Victory* gaining a far wider readership and more positive reception in the United States than in Great Britian. The effect upon Conrad's popularity endured after the war and resulted in *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) being the second-best-

[16] Conrad, *Collected Letters, Vol.* 8, Letter to Edward Garnett of 2 June 1923, p. 109.

selling novel in the country.[17] Newspapers reported "that in 1920 the sales of the books of Joseph Conrad in '21 (June) have reached 300,000".[18]

It was not only from a geographical perspective that Conrad introduced new vistas. His style was also refreshingly innovative, experimenting with the use of various narrative voices and temporal dislocations. For his more astute readers, such devices would also have drawn attention to what Conrad's tales had to say about the fluidity of perception and the implications for the definition of truth. If his subject matter explored the borderlines between competing powers and cultures, his challenging of fictional conventions, his original syntax and European sensibilities also introduced readers to influences from France, Russia and Poland.

However, as Mallios observes, political agendas are fast-moving and literary popularity can be both fickle and fleeting.[19] By the latter half of the 1920s, one anonymous critic of the day proclaims:

> We begin to see […] that he was not the great stylist we had fancied, that he has had no influence on either the popular imagination or even his fellow-artists, and that…. he does not lie in any English tradition at all, nor has he in the least influenced English thought or English writers as lesser artists have done.[20]

It would not be until the late 1940s that critical opinion would find reason to revisit Conrad's works, by which time the world was emerging from yet another devasting war and the preoccupations of the leading literary critics of the day had changed considerably.

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[17] Statistics compiled from Publishers Weekly. See www.oef.berkley.edu/~immer/books 1910.
[18] Conrad, *Collected Letters, Vol. 7,* Letter to J. B. Pinker of 4 July 1921, pp. 310-11.
[19] Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', p. 118.
[20] Mary Burgoyne, et al. *Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Reviews. Vol. 4, The Rescue to Last Essays*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 540-42.

**The Humanist Moment: The 1940s and after.**

The renaissance in Conrad's popularity came, not entirely surprisingly in light of what has been observed about his preoccupation with times of upheaval, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. This was a period during which it was widely perceived that the pre-war dispensation was open to challenge. The competing forces of conservatism and progress were at odds both in politics and literature.

Meanwhile, as Mallios notes, in the world of academe the Cambridge scholar F. R. Leavis had co-founded the literary magazine *Scrutiny* in 1932.[21] This project endeavoured to push back against what Leavis perceived as the deleterious effects of industrialisation and combined both the radical and the conservative in a manner which closely echoed Conrad's own conflicted view of the effects of technological change. It was perhaps for this reason that Leavis was moved to include Conrad in his seminal work *The Great Tradition* (1948), in which he identified Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad as the exemplars and standard-bearers of great English Literature.[22] Leavis's re-evaluation of Conrad's place in the pantheon of English letters also resulted in a surprising reconsideration of which of the writer's novels should be considered as pre-eminent. Leavis criticises *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* as over-written and image- laden, and argues that they thus fail to articulate a clear intent. Meanwhile, he praises *Nostromo* (1904) and *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Victory* (1915) and *Chance* (1913) as great humanist works. Clearly, for Leavis, these works met his stipulation that a great novel be rooted in deep human experience, while at the same time possessing profound moral energy and intensity. *Nostromo* also won his approval on the grounds of its marriage of originality of form with moral intent.

[21] Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', p. 123.
[22] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948).

During this period, the prophetic thread which runs through Conrad's oeuvre faded from critical view and more fundamental questions of what it means to be human came to the fore. As Mallios argues, this was particularly evident in American critical thought where the revival of interest in the author was led by Thomas Moser's *Joseph Conrad's: Achievement and Decline* (1957) and Albert J. Guérard's *Conrad the Novelist* (1958).[23] The former uses Freudian analysis to consider Conrad's treatment of the subject of sex and his portrayal of women, the latter employing Freudian and Jungian analysis. While these works opened new avenues of understanding leading away from the societal and historical contextualisation of his works, they also revealed potential weaknesses, particularly in Conrad's sometimes awkward portrayal of relationships between men and women, and his difficulty in realising female characters. This is an aspect of the author's writing to which I will return to in my analysis of the major Asian novels.

Mallios advocates that the next change in critical emphasis was consolidated by the overtly political works of Zdzisław Najder.[24] Najder, a Polish critic, historian and political activist (he served as an adviser to the statesman Lech Wałęsa) made available the Polish cultural, moral and historical contexts and experiences underlying Conrad's writings.[25] Mallios suggests that this process of contextual broadening was consolidated by the work of Ian Watt's book *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*.[26]

[23] Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957); Albert J. Guérard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).
[24] Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', p. 126.
[25] Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life* (Woodbridge: Suffolk Camden House, 2007).
[26] Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

**The Postcolonial Moment: From the 1960s to the present.**

The landscape of debate was to be dramatically transformed as de-colonisation gained momentum from 1957 onwards, and as social and political theories gained currency. In the context of the post-colonial movement Conrad's works were to provide an ideal battleground for debate and schism. As Mallios states "This was the moment when *difference* becomes the self-conscious engine of Conrad's reception".[27] In spite of the diversity of opinions, encouraged at least in part by the ambiguity inherent in many of Conrad's tales, debate often crystalised into binary oppositions between adherents of various theoretical schools of thought. Mallios suggests that such debates gave birth to the notion of 'writing back' to Conrad and served as a springboard to elevate debate of his work above the purely literary.[28]

It was around the contentious issue of race that intellectual discourse became most inflamed, particularly following the publication of Chinua Achebe's 'An Image of Africa'.[29] Achebe took Conrad to task, and labelling him "a bloody racist", and pointing out the absence of articulate African voices in *Heart of Darkness*, a drama set almost exclusively on the African continent. Although feminist writers have levelled similarly grave charges in the context of gender politics, it has been the accusation of racism and of a particularly narrow Western perspective which have tended to adhere most tenaciously to the author. Such interpretations persist, despite arguments in the author's defence such as those put forward by Hugh Mercer Cutler, who notes Conrad's extensive use of irony to foreground the inherent flaws of colonialism.[30]

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[27] Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', p. 126.
[28] Mallios, 'Conrad's Reception', p. 127.
[29] Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa', *The Massachusetts Review*, 18.4 (1977), 782-94.
[30] Hugh Mercer Cutler, 'Achebe on Conrad: Racism and Greatness in *Heart of Darkness*', *The Conradian*, 29.1 (1997), 20–30.

In the context of the current thesis, it is noteworthy that the main thrust of the arguments about Conrad's handling of race has tended to centre upon the relationship between Caucasian and African peoples, at the expense of a discussion of his treatment of his Asian characters. However, it was Conrad himself who claimed in a response to Hugh Clifford's scathing review of *Almayer's Folly,* in which he accused Conrad of "complete ignorance of Malays and their habits and customs", that "of course I don't know anything about Malays".[31] This is a sensitive and important area, and one which will form an essential element of this thesis. The works of the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer will be drawn upon as a revealing and informative contrast to Conrad's Asian novels.

There is no doubt that the profuse intellectual debates that were precipitated by the rise of various ideological approaches in the 1960s opened up many new avenues of investigation and enhanced the appreciation of Conrad's novels. It is beyond question that the explosion of critical approaches to Conrad revealed the depth and importance of his body of work, while also informing the next era of Conradian critical thinking. This brings the century-long discussion up to the present day.

**The Present Moment: The Twenty-First Century**

Mallios identifies the following major works as essential to contemporary critical responses to Conrad's works[32]: Asoko Nakai's *The English Book and its Marginalia*[33]*;* Byron Caminero-Santangelo's *Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality*[34]*;* Natalie Melas's *All the Difference*

[31] Joseph Conrad, *Notes on My Books*, p. 90.
[32] Mallios, 'Conrad`s Reception', p. 129.
[33] Asako Nakai, *The English Book and its Marginalia: Colonial/Postcolonial Literature after 'Heart of Darkness'* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).
[34] Byron Caminero-Santangelo, *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

*in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*[35]; and Christopher GoGwilt's *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya*.[36]

Tellingly, three of these contain the word "post-colonial" in their title, but only one includes mention of Indonesia's leading post-colonial novelist Pramoedya, an omission upon which this thesis hopes to prompt reflection and debate.

Part 3 of GoGwilt's study is of particular relevance. In this he explores the genealogies of English and Indonesian Modernisms, analyses the historical emergence of Pramoedya's *Buru Quartet* and, perhaps most pertinently of all, examines the character of the *Nyai* or concubine. GoGwilt makes the case that this figure stands at the centre of transnational literary Modernism. He also makes the important connection between Indonesian nationalism and Indonesian literary Modernism. In identifying de-colonisation as a key thread in the *Buru Quartet,* GoGwilt argues that the series of novels provide "an enduring literary-historical record of the period of anti-colonial national awakening".[37]

Mallios also identifies four volumes of "Contemporary Reviews" which aim to open up transnational views of Conrad's original readership. Of these, *Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives* considers the texts from the vantage points of France, Germany, Poland and South Africa and "The Orient".[38] It is worthy of note that, in spite of the title of the collection including the word "East", the first four countries cited do not conform to this definition; three are Western and predominantly Caucasian nations, while France and Germany are also former colonial powers.

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[35] Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the ends of Comparison* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).
[36] GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya*.
[37] GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya*, p. 177.
[38] Keith Carabine, Owen Knowles, and Wiesław Krajka, eds, *Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

There are two further important currents of critical thinking on Conrad which have come to the fore during the last two decades and have gathered momentum over the last ten years. The first of these is the pertinence of the inter-related themes of globalisation, commerce and extractive industry to a rounded understanding of Conrad's novels, and how these topics deeply influence and inform the novels' narrative content, thematic intent and use of language. Such readings also explain the enduring pertinence of Conrad's work in an increasingly globalised world, in which the challenges faced by humankind are existential in nature, particularly as they relate to industry and the environment. Amongst the numerous publications which explore this territory and that have proved invaluable to this present study, are articles by Elizabeth Carolyn Miller and Michael Tondre, alongside book-length studies by Peter Eichstaedt and Andrew Francis. [39]

A further channel of critical thinking about Conrad that has emerged from the commercial reading of his works has been the nexus between capital and ecology. This has been deftly explored by Caitlin Vandertop.[40] Drawing upon Jason W. Moore's work on the notion of the "Capitalocene", Vandertop argues that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a profound meditation on the dependence of capitalism upon material frontiers, where a voracious economic model becomes imbricated with nature in an unequal and ultimately self-destructive bonding.[41] She also explores how this interface, and the networks of which it is an integral part, manipulate value. She notes how ivory, which had traditionally been used by the Congolese in the construction of shelters, was

[39] Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, 'Drill Baby Drill: Extraction Ecologies, Open Temporalities, and Reproductive Futurity in the Provincial Realist Novel', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 48.1 (2020), 29-56; Michael Tondre, 'Conrad's Carbon Imaginary'; Peter Eichstaedt, *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World's Deadliest Place* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2016); Francis, *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[40] Caitlin Vandertop, 'The Earth Seemed Unearthly: Capital, World-Ecology and Enchanted Nature in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 64.4 (2018), 680-700.
[41] Jason W Moore, 'The Capitalocene Part 2: Accumulation and the Centrality of Unpaid Work/Energy', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45.2 (2018), 237-79.

appropriated by the likes of Kurtz and exported for the manufacture of billiard balls. These were manufactured in the West and sold at a rich premium to the clubs and stately homes of Europe – a vivid image of the product of capital meeting non-capitalised nature.

The reasons for the current preoccupation with what can be broadly termed the world of business are manifold. However, I suggest the foremost rationales are to be found in the debates spurred by the effects of globalisation, the financial crisis of 2008 and the global climate emergency.

As Francis writes in the conclusion to *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction:*

> In the commercial context historical reality performs a complex and subtle role in Conrad's Asian texts which requires interpretation, and sometimes recovery, in order to bring fully to light a commercial presence which often lies partly outside, or deeply within, the text rather than being foregrounded, and where it can sometimes only be fully observed through its phenomenological manifestations.[42]

It is the notion of the need to experience first-hand those things about which we read (if we are to truly understand them) that lies at the heart of my own journey with Conrad. I suggest it has been my experience of living in the countries and amongst the peoples about whom he wrote, which provides this thesis its unique insight. This notion will be explored in more detail in chapter eight.

The experiential dimension is also convergent with the recent writings of Felski, in which she explains how theory can only take us so far in our understanding of the sometimes-inexplicable draw of certain works of art.[43] Like Felski, I would argue that what Francis terms "phenomenology" in the context of Conrad, is the essential source of meaning and value. In the

[42] Francis, *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction*, p. 188.
[43] Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*.

final judgement there can be no substitute for lived experience when it comes to understanding the works that have influenced our lives, an influence that is not static but which mutates through time. By comparison, both theories and aesthetic judgements are abstractions which are detached from actual lived reality.

Felski challenges the ethos of critical aloofness which she identifies as a part of modern scholars' self-image. She argues that the reader brings a wealth of their own personal experiences, views and prejudices to the understanding of a work of art, underscoring that all of these factors interact with the written word. Although questioning the role of literary theory in the evaluation and appreciation of an artwork, she does draw upon the conceptual thinking of Actor-Network Theory, a methodological approach to social theory which posits that everything in the social and natural world exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships. This approach contends that nothing exists outside those relationships.

Felski writes:

> Until recently, there was a chasm between such autographical reflection and academic criticism: not just in style but in their underlying premises. It is not only the casual mixing of art and life that jars with the protocols of scholarship but the belief that one can be transformed for the better by an aesthetic encounter. The New Critics brushed aside the question of literature's impact on its reader – such talk was a matter for psychologists, not literary critics. And later historical and political approaches waved the banner of "context" and "structural conditions" in a way that left little room for reflection on how art affects *persons.*[44]

[44] Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, p. 62.

Her central contention is that the experience of life mediates a work far more powerfully than the study of a text in a classroom and that the stance of the reader formed over the course of a lifetime should be afforded far more privilege in the critical process. She insists upon the power and agency of a novel to stimulate action. She sites Rebecca Mead's memoir *My Life in Middlemarch* (2014) to elucidate the point, quoting Mead's remarks upon "the strange potency of a great book: the way a book can insert itself into a reader's own history, a reader's own life story, until it is hard to know what one would be without it."[45] As such, Felski is arguing that we need to break free of the simplistic unitary or binary view of how a work of art functions, moving from a position in which it is assumed that the word on the page acts upon the passive reader, to one in which the reader brings a wealth of influences (and biases) to the reading of any given text. This more liberal approach also allows for a dynamic and mutualistic relationship between the author, their work, and the reader, while accepting and explaining that any two individuals may have very different views of and reactions to any given novel.

Such an approach also enables a deeper and more nuanced reading of Conradian literary criticism. A case in point is Andrew Francis's *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction* (2015), one of the first full length expositions of the role of commerce in Conrad's Asian fiction. While my own thinking on the centrality of commerce aligns strongly with that articulated by Francis, the author's own subjective perceptions emerge in the concluding chapter, where he writes:

> It is in the Asian fiction, a large body, as we have seen, of culturally cohesive writing, that Conrad most thoroughly, consistently and widely critiques the colonial enterprise. Its European representatives – both Dutch and British – are taken largely from those at the

[45] Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, p. 75.

> margin of that enterprise, in whose situations and in whose hands, it can compellingly be seen for what it is, alongside the colonized whose voices we hear as authentic.
>
> The Asian fiction offers numerous representations of the nobility of Malay peoples which work to undercut European behaviour. Hassim and Immada in *The Rescue*, for example, contrast starkly with the self-seeking Travers. Many Malay individuals are portrayed protecting their rights, and they are seen to contrast by irony of situation or behaviour with the evidence of European opportunism, rapacity, or self-deception in the characters ranging from Travers to Lingard to Almayer. The contrast is accentuated by Conrad's giving Malay culture and people a voice and presence, and highlighting their bravery, sense of honour, and qualities of leadership – qualities which hold them up to ironic contrast with for example, the indecorously and discourteous lounging of the Dutch naval officers in *Almayer's Folly*. [46]

By generalizing the population of the Malay Archipelago as Malay, Francis reveals a common Western misconception that all of that geography's people are somehow descendants of the Malay race, a statement which is factually incorrect (it is still not unusual to hear Westerners refer to Malaysia by its former colonial name Malaya). I contend that Francis's statement is potentially problematic as it fails to reflect the very different roles and contributions of the various racial and ethnic groups which comprise the diverse populations of this geography. While not disputing the case he makes for Conrad's use of irony to point up the iniquities of both the Dutch and British colonial models, I find it concerning to read in a book which makes a strong case for a commercial reading of Conrad's Asian novels a failure to identify the critical economic role of the ethnic

[46] Francis, *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction*, p. 190.

Chinese community. This is an oversight with which taipans such as Li Ka Shin, Robert Kuok and Quek Leng Chan might take issue. To claim that Conrad gives "Malay culture and people a voice and presence…highlighting their bravery, sense of honour, and qualities of leadership" could be regarded as over-stating the case, particularly when it is remembered that there is not a single lead (or even secondary) Asian character in any of the Asian novels. Francis also overlooks the important place of the indigenous aboriginal and Peranakan peoples of the archipelago.

However, my intention in citing this example is not to dismiss this fine and otherwise deeply insightful critical work, but rather to make the point that we all bring to our critical appraisal our own experiences, perceptions and prejudices. I will almost certain stand guilty of similar charges in the course of this thesis. More importantly, as Felski correctly reminds us, we should not be asking "what does this work fail to see?" but rather "what is this work forcing me to notice?".[47]

This leads to the second, and crucially important, recent development in Conrad studies, one which is of particular pertinence in light of my contention that the missing voice in Conrad's Asian fiction is that of his Asian characters. I refer here to the work of critics such as Agnes S. K. Yeow, whose *Conrad's Eastern Vision*: *A Vain and Floating Appearance* (2009) provides an important Asian academic perspective on the continuing evolution of Conradian debate. Yeow, a member of the Peranakan community, brings unique insight into the pre-colonial history of the broader South East Asian region (ancient Nusantara). Her work explores the genesis of Patusan and its people, while also drawing revealing comparisons between the narrative form of *Lord Jim* and the Malay historical medium, the *hikayat.* This relationship is presented as follows:

[47] Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, p. 153.

> The iconic literary genre of the Malay world is to a large extent a narrative history in the hands of an accomplished, romantic storyteller. Seen in this light, Conrad's aesthetic creed, "Fiction is history, human history or it is nothing" resonates with a thematic significance which is consistently playing out not only throughout his Eastern tales but across his entire corpus.[48]

To return to the importance of business, technology and innovative disruption highlighted earlier in this chapter, Yeow identifies the significance of technological innovation in the field of optics which was taking place at the time that Conrad was writing his major Asian novels. She foregrounds the importance that Conrad attaches to the act of seeing and how this, like over-dependence upon objective facts, can cause us to lose "sight" of that elusive and multi-faceted commodity: the truth.

My own thesis builds upon these recent developments in Conrad criticism. It also brings to bear my own personal perspectives to demonstrate the power of Conrad's body of fictional work to prompt action and to articulate how a life engaged in the world of multi-national business can both illuminate and be illuminated by the works of a novelist writing over one hundred years ago.

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[48] Agnes S. K. Yeow, *Conrad's Eastern Vision – A Vain and Floating Appearance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 67.

## Chapter Four: Emerging Themes, Devices and Potential Problems - *Almayer's Folly*

> A writer of imaginative prose (even more than any other sort of artist) stands confessed in his works.
>
> Conrad, *A Personal Record* (1912).[1]

Published in 1895, *Almayer's Folly* was Conrad's breakthrough novel. Its originality of subject matter, setting and style caught the imagination of the more inquisitive-minded members of the reading public. As Heliéna Krenn observes:

> When with the publication of *Almayer's Folly* Conrad appeared on the England's literary horizon, his work immediately attracted an attentive even if limited readership. Conrad was hailed as a literary explorer of territory hitherto unknown in English fiction. The Malay Archipelago in general and Borneo in particular were a new world for Conrad's readers that held the appeal of the distant and the exotic. They applauded the freshness of the setting and the vividness with which Conrad's imagination presented it.[2]

*Almayer's Folly* not only introduced readers to a world both new and strange, but it did so in a way which challenged them, while also creating a sense of moral unease. For the English reader this was perhaps timely and in tune with their growing sense of discomfort as the certainties of the Victorian era came to be questioned and the gloss of empire began to tarnish.

Although it cannot be claimed that Conrad burst fully formed onto the literary stage, there is sufficient evidence of the ideas and techniques that he developed in later works to appreciate why

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[1] Conrad, *A Personal Record*.

[2] Heliéna Krenn, *Conrad's Lingard Trilogy: Empire, Race and Women in the Malay Novels* (New York: Garland, 1990), p. xiii.

the publication of this work heralded the arrival of a peculiarly original and provocative new talent. This was also a talent arrived from foreign parts. Conrad was born in a lesser-known European country, one which had been subjected to occupation by a foreign power, though not imperial colonisation. This is a distinction which Conrad appeared to find significant, suggesting that he viewed the power politics and cultural setting of Europe differently from those of South East Asia, an early indication perhaps of the cultural bias that is pervasive in his works.

Here also was a novelist who was as much acquainted with life on unpredictable seas, having sailed six of the seven great oceans, as he was with the more solid certainty of land. As a point of entry into the Conradian imagination *Almayer's Folly* provides the researcher with a rich trove of evidence regarding the author's likely objectives, motivations and fascination with innovative literary techniques. As Jan Gordon argues, *Almayer's Folly* introduces a number of important themes developed in later novels, in particular the linkage of the human with the materially commercial and fungible. He cites the following examples from the Asian novels:

> The threat of the withdrawal of sponsoring foreign investment, in the redundant Tropical Belt Coal Company (*Victory*); the stranded, beautiful "Jewel" who even nominally reflects the materiality of an undefined love in a colonial outpost (*Lord Jim*); Lena's metaphoric alignment with hidden gold in Schomberg's narrative that prompts the speculation of invasive brigands on Samburan – are all comparable *material attachments* in Conrad.[3]

The novel also foreshadows certain potentially problematic issues, in particular, Conrad's seemingly conflicted position on the issue of colonisation: his apparent attribution of its more

[3] Jan B. Gordon, 'Conrad and the Problematics of Rescue', working paper delivered at the triannual meeting of the *Conrad Society of Poland*, in Krakow, Poland, 10 October 2024, p. 4.

egregious traits with the Dutch as opposed to the British model; his tendency towards the stereotyping of his Asian characters; and the primacy he affords the perspective of his Western characters at the expense of those whose countries they occupy. This thesis will explore each of these in depth.

As Krenn asserts, the conventional critical consensus is that the central idea of the novel is imperialism and its consequences. The latter are reflected in the contrasting narratives of Almayer and his daughter, Nina, as they wrestle with their individual predicaments and pursue their divergent dreams. While there is no doubt that the novel presages Conrad's engagement with the subject of imperialism, territory that he was to explore in subsequent novels, I argue in this chapter that it is the business of trade and commerce which lies at the heart of *Almayer's Folly.* It is the acquisitive commercial instinct which is the primary motivation of not only the eponymous anti-hero of the novel but also the other leading protagonists, be they Malay, Arab or Chinese. Imperialism provides the backcloth and also informs some of Almayer's entrenched racist beliefs, but above all else it is the drive for commercial gain and wealth, not any cultural or ideological manifestation of colonialism, which is the catalyst of the drama. It can be said that commercial colonialism frames the universe into which Conrad places his characters.

Indeed, it is through the lens of trade and commerce that Conrad engages with his most universal preoccupation, namely humankind's place within an ultimately unknowable and dispassionate global system of human interaction and exchange – commerce in its broadest sense. This is a system over which humankind hubristically and misguidedly believes they have dominion, fundamentally failing to grasp that they are in fact the subject to the forces of commercial self-interest, which are often random and amoral. The same forces and delusions are as evident in today's ostensibly globalised economy as they were in Conrad's day. It is for this reason (alongside

considerations of literary originality and merit) that Conrad's Asian works remain of enduring relevance and why I have found them resonating through my own experience of working in commerce in South East Asia and beyond for more than three decades. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to identify Conrad's overarching agenda and the techniques by which he explores and animates his major themes. It is also to tease out potentially problematic issues. As such, this chapter will serve as both a point of departure and guide as I go on to consider the other two major Asian works in the Conradian canon, namely *Lord Jim* and *Victory*.

As discussed in the Review of Literature, much recent Conradian criticism has focused upon the author's treatment of the subject of trade. Jasanoff's *The Dawn Watch* lauds Conrad as the first writer of the twentieth century to foresee what is now described as globalisation.[4] Trade in Conrad's Malay novels is often the *raison d'être* for his Western characters embarking on their individual odysseys to Southeast Asia and is often responsible for locating them in, and tethering them to, their specific dramatic settings. These are, more often than not, ports, estuaries or rivers, which provide not only the infrastructure upon which trade depends but afford the author a rich pallet of ambiguously fluid imagery upon which to draw. Conrad and his fictional characters were not, of course, in the vanguard of such exploratory quests. As early as 1748 the philosopher David Hume had written an article entitled "Of Justice". In this piece he optimistically expressed the view that the expansion of global trade, and the consequent building of economic relations with others, could extend supposedly universal notions, such as morality and a sense of justice:

[4] Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*, pp. 6-7, 11, 285, 301 and 313.

> again, suppose that several societies maintain a kind of intercourse for mutual convenience and advantage, the boundaries of justice will grow larger in proportion to the largeness of men's views, and the force of their mutual connections.[5]

The economist Amartya Sen builds on this thought over two hundred years later in his memoir:

> The reach of our sense of justice may depend on who we come to know and with whom we become familiar, and this can be facilitated by our encounters, including those of trade and exchange. In contrast, a lack of familiarity can keep other people away from our thoughts and excluded from our concern about justice in relation to them: contact offers the possibility of moral thinking on a larger scale.[6]

It becomes apparent early in *Almayer's Folly* that Conrad took a less Panglossian view, one perhaps forged in his early Polish experience. His view was also informed by his increasingly critical perceptions of the operation of the colonial enterprise during his fifteen years as a merchant seaman, much of which was spent plying the waters of the South China Sea. In Conrad's novel, trade is portrayed as synonymous with race and nationality; the Dutch, the British, the Malays, the Arabs and the Chinese are locked in a self-interested, zero-sum game over trade routes, resources and power. Lakamba's loyal major-domo and "ambassador", Babalatchi, expresses this idea succinctly:

[5] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* ed. by Tom L. Beauchamp (Minneapolis: Franklin Classics, 2018), p. 47.
[6] Amartya Sen, *Home in the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 397.

> Let him slay the white men that come to us to trade, with prayers on their lips and loaded guns in their hands they are on every sea, and on every shore, and they are very many. (115)

Here we see the Dutch models of colonialism and trade eliding into one malign force, comparable in its savagery to anything attributed by Almayer to the Malays, Arabs and Chinese. The Chinese may have invented the gunpowder used in the guns of the colonialists, but it was the Europeans who were trading it as a commodity in Asia.

Babalatchi goes on to lament the passing of the halcyon days before the Dutch arrived in the Indies:

> Then we fought amongst ourselves and were happy. Now when we fight with you we can only die. (155)

His exclamation highlights the decisive role played by innovation in the field of weaponry and its importance to the maintenance of Western domination.

The locating of a dislocated Westerner on the shores of a river (often serving as the first means of commercial distribution) in a distant and alien land is an ideal setting for Conrad's exploration of his chosen theme. This is a land in which Almayer believes lie opportunities to trade and exploit natural resources and where, by dint of colonialism, and its assumption of the racial superiority of the Caucasian, he feels some form of proprietary ownership and competitive advantage. Ironically, this is an advantage he proves incapable of exploiting. For this is a place which he fails to fully comprehend and to which he resolutely refuses to adapt. The vainglorious character of this self-deluding man is captured early in the novel, as we read in the first chapter:

> Almayer had left his home with a light heart and a lighter pocket, speaking English well, and strong in arithmetic; ready to conquer the world, never doubting he would. (6)

The reference to arithmetic is an early ironic pointer towards Conrad's deep suspicion of those who put unwarranted faith in the certainty of facts (a theme explored more extensively in *Lord Jim* and *Victory*). Almayer's proficiency in English gestures towards the importance of English as the language of commerce, while the use of the word "conquer" foregrounds the confrontational and inflexible nature of Almayer's character – traits which will ultimately lead to his downfall. Conrad's portrayal of Almayer as unbending stands in contrast to the pragmatic, and sometimes wily, adaptability of his Malay and Arab characters.

The contextualising of Almayer's background makes it clear that his tendencies to both self-delusion and prejudice are almost certainly inherited from his parents, who lived the expatriate life in Indonesia, thereby implying that these were deeply ingrained cultural peculiarities.

We learn:

> His father, a subordinate official employed in the Botanical Gardens of Buitenzorg, was no doubt delighted to place his son in such a firm [that of old Hudig]. The young man himself too was nothing loth to leave the poisonous shores of Java, and the meagre comforts of the parental bungalow, where the father grumbled all day at the stupidity of native gardeners, and the mother from the depths of her easy chair bewailed the lost glories of Amsterdam, where she had been brought up, and of her position as the daughter of a cigar dealer there. (6)

Conrad deliberately makes Almayer's father's employer the Botanical Gardens of Buitenzorg (modern day Bogor), as this binds him directly to a central commercial pillar of the Dutch colonial project. Leveraging the research of the Buitenzorg institute, Dutch botanists were responsible for converting Indonesian agriculture from an indigenous model, based upon local self-sufficiency, to

one which produced internationally-traded cash crops such as coffee, palm oil and tobacco (no doubt used in Almayer's father-in-law's cigar business).[7] At the end of the nineteenth century the income generated by such crops enabled the Netherlands to pay off the national debt and at one point contributed 30% of the budget of the national exchequer. This they were able to do, at least in part, due to the pitifully small return they allowed to the Indonesian farmers who cultivated coffee.[8] Therefore, there is deep irony in the arrogance of Almayer's father berating his gardeners. For these self-same gardeners were now having to pay for their food in the marketplace instead of growing it themselves for their own consumption. This is a good example of Conrad's skill at revealing character through behaviour rather than by means of pure description, a technique he was to develop to great effect during what Jacques Berthoud has termed the author's "major phase".[9]

In this toxic commercialised universe, Conrad's drama is played out to its inevitably tragic conclusions. This inevitability is brought about by the rigidity of colonial characters like Almayer's mother, who, although long-settled in Indonesia, has adapted not one jot to the local culture, and dreams only of returning to Amsterdam. As in the other major Asian novels, Conrad appears to be suggesting the impossibility of people from different races and cultures reaching a workable accommodation or understanding, at least not while under a colonial dispensation populated by such rigid and narrow characters. The evident prejudices of the Almayer household certainly do not augur well for their son. This deeply pessimistic view is another unifying notion

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[7] Alec Gordon, 'How Big was Indonesia's "Real" Colonial Surplus in 1878-1941?', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42.4 (2012), 560-80.

[8] Mark Pendergast, *Uncommon Grounds* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), p. 40.

[9] Jacques Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

which runs throughout Conrad's entire body of work. *Almayer's Folly* can be seen as the author's manifesto or statement of intent.

In the course of this relatively short novel, we encounter several of the devices with which we are to become increasingly familiar in later works. Examination of these devices reveals that all are both well suited and deftly employed in the service of Conrad's exploration of the commercial forces that lie at the core of the novel. The first and most pertinent of these devices is the use of the tropical environment as an emotive dramatic backdrop. This often serves as a metaphor for the ambiguous environment in which trade and commerce frequently operates. Secondly, Conrad uses delayed decoding, a term coined by Ian Watt, to create a sense of uncertainty and a world in which neither the characters nor the reader ever has perfect knowledge. [10] This is a reality familiar to anyone who has ever been engaged in the practice of business. The technique of delayed decoding also heightens the dramatic impact of the work. Lastly, the use of irony encourages the reader to question the motivations of each of the protagonists, and suggests that these are perhaps not as they might appear. Indeed, closer examination often reveals that characters' motives are almost invariably grounded in their self-serving personal commercial interests.

Before exploring these areas in more detail, a comment on the narrative voice of the novel is necessary. The extensive use of irony prompts the reader to search for the narrator/author's own views on the business of colonial capitalism and the nature of the inter-personal relationships that it bred. However, the distinguishing of Conrad's own voice from that of any implied narrator is far from straight-forward in *Almayer's Folly*. The differentiation of the various narrative voices becomes far more distinct in the later works, particularly in *Lord Jim* (it may also in part explain

[10] Ian Watt, '"Pink Toads and Yellow Curs": An Impressionist Narrative Device in *Lord Jim*', in *Joseph Conrad Colloquy in Poland, 5-12 September 1972*, ed. by Róża Jabłkowska (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1975), 11-31.

Conrad's subsequent motivation to invent his most commonly employed narrator, Marlow). However, reflection upon this area helps us to locate the potential oversights scoped out in the introduction of this thesis. In spite of Conrad's preoccupation with shifting perspectives to provide the reader with various tantalising glimpses of the truth, the one which he largely omits is that of his Asian characters, particularly those who are female. Surprisingly, in view of *Almayer's Folly* being his first novel, it is through the character of Nina that he perhaps comes closest to providing us with such an insight. The characterisation of Jewel and Lena in *Lord Jim* and *Victory* respectively, is somewhat less successful.

Unlike several subsequent more technically sophisticated novels, such as *Lord Jim*, *Almayer's Folly* is generally presented from the perspective of an omniscient narrator (albeit with moments of free indirect discourse). This might lead the reader to expect an easier journey, more normally associated with writers like Rudyard Kipling, John Buchan or Nathaniel Hawthorne, and an absence of the narrative ambiguity that is so often identified as both a source of richness and frustration in Conrad's writing. However, the apparent simplicity that the single voice would seem to imply is deceptive. The shifting tone of this voice, and what it may disclose about the narrator's (or is it the author's?) own views and values is examined later in this chapter. However, for the time being, I will engage in a more detailed exploration of the literary devices deployed by Conrad and what they reveal about the importance of commercial imperatives and trading to the Conradian agenda.

One of the most strikingly original aspects of Conrad's writing, one that becomes apparent to the reader first encountering Conrad through *Almayer's Folly*, is his idiosyncratic use of English prose. Whether this is the product of a man wrestling with the peculiarities of the English language, only learnt in adulthood as a third tongue, or the masterly crafting of imagery to convey precisely the

desired effect, is not the preoccupation of this chapter. However, it may have been Conrad's unique syntax which led many critics to argue that the imagery of the natural world encountered in *Almayer's Folly* is one of its weakest elements.[11] I suggest that this is to under-value an important and powerful aspect of Conrad's early writing, as I believe he harnesses the power of both language and the physicality of the tropical environment to create a vivid, disturbing and distinctive world, one about which he had unique and deceptively challenging views. This is a view supported by J. I. M. Stewart, who goes so far as to consider "external nature a sinister and alarming mystery" that constitutes "the emotional focus of the novel".[12]

Conrad's use of elaborate descriptions of the natural landscape and climate, as either reflections of the emotional anguish being experienced by his characters or more often as metaphors for the fatalistic environment in which they find themselves marooned, is one of the most compelling aspects of *Almayer's Folly*. One of the earliest images in the novel provides an ominous clue to Conrad's views on the likely fate of humankind in general and of Almayer in particular. The image is of a passive tree trunk, observed by Almayer, being tossed indiscriminately along the river. It is around this mass of muddy water that the bulk of the action is to take place:

> One of those drifting trees grounded on the shelving shore, just by the house, and Almayer, neglecting his dream, watched it with languid interest. The tree swung slowly round, amid the hiss and foam of the water, and soon getting free of the obstruction began to move

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[11] Ted Eugene Boyle, *Symbol and Meaning in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (London: Mouton, 1965), p. 26; Donald C. Yelton, *Mimesis and Metaphor: An Inquiry into the Genesis and Scope of Conrad's Symbolic Imagery* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), p. 215.
[12] J. I. M. Stewart, *Joseph Conrad* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1968), p. 39.

> downstream again, rolling slowly over, raising upwards a long, denuded branch, like a hand lifted in mute appeal to heaven against the river's brutal and unnecessary violence. (6)

The drifting log invites speculation as to whom or what it is meant to represent. It clearly does not simply stand for Almayer, who remains caught in Sambir to the end of his life, whereas the reader is informed that the tree frees itself, presumably to move on towards the open sea. Alternatively, if the log is seen as standing for Dain, who escapes from the Dutch authorities in Sambir, the novel might be read as Dain's story. This is a reading to which Pramoedya subscribed and which I will explore in Chapter Seven. I suggest the symbolic function of the floating tree should not be limited to either of these characters. It has wider implications, which gradually become apparent as the novel develops. These relate to the network of commercial activities that are taking place beyond the boundaries of the small stretch of Sambir river around which the action of the novel centres. These logs have not simply fallen into the river by chance, but have been cut down by unknown actors involved in some undisclosed commercial activity, most probably coal mining in view of the Netherlands only having small deposits of this increasingly essential raw material.[13] This would have put the country at a distinct competitive disadvantage compared to their major colonial and industrial competitor, Great Britain. Thus, the scene evokes the notion that Almayer and the other characters upon which the novel focuses are surrounded by a wider network of business activity, about which they have little or imperfect knowledge.

The image of the drifting tree calls to mind the passage in *Lord Jim* in which the collector of butterflies, Stein, philosophises on the human condition:

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[13] Jan-Peter Smits, Edwin Horlings and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Dutch GNP and its components 1800-1913* (Groningen Growth and Development Centre Monograph Series No. 5. Sept 2016).

> "A man that is born," Stein says, "falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns… The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up".

This is a recommendation to which a man of Almayer's rigidity of character is completely impervious; it also marks him out as being ill-suited to the world of commerce, in which an ability to read and adapt to dynamic environments is essential. (154)

Similar logs are implicated in the supposed death of Dain. In Chapter Six, the turning point of this formally structured twelve-chapter drama, the Sambir river is described as being in full flood, playing capriciously with the seemingly continuous flow of logs that it carries, and the body that they have supposedly crushed:

> The men rushed out excited but silent and ran towards the muddy point where the unconscious logs tossed, and ground, and bumped and rolled over the dead stranger with the stupid persistency of inanimate things. (71)

Finally, after the flood has abated, Almayer watches yet more logs being swept to their unknown destination as he contemplates his hopelessness following the departure of his beloved daughter, Nina.

In spite of being set in the bright sunlight and verdant foliage of the topics, the environment is often portrayed in terms of shadow, struggle and decay, a visual texture common to many of Conrad's subsequent Asian works. It is a texture that we more generally associate with a dimly lit urban setting such as that encountered in *The Secret Agent,* where descriptors such as "gloomy", "grimy" and "rubbishy" are frequently used. Indeed, in the Author's Note to *The Secret Agent,*

Conrad refers to London as the “devourer of the world’s light”, possessing “darkness enough to bury five million lives”.[14] We encounter a similarly ominous sense of doom and decay early in *Almayer’s Folly*. The passage concerning the tryst between the lovers Dain and Nina is quoted at some length to demonstrate the manner in which Conrad subverts what at first sight appears to be a description of an idyllic romantic setting:

> In a moment the two little nutshells with their occupants floated quietly side by side, reflected by the black water in the dim light struggling through a high canopy of dense foliage; while above, way up in the broad day, flamed immense red blossoms sending down on their heads a shower of great dew-sparkling petals that descended rotating slowly in a continuous and perfumed stream; and over them, under them in the sleeping water; all around them in a ring of luxuriant vegetation bathed in the warm air charged with strong and harsh perfumes, the intense work of tropical nature went on: plants shooting upward, entwined, interlaced in inextricable confusion, climbing madly and brutally over each other in the terrible silence of a desperate struggle towards the life-giving sunshine above – as if struck with the sudden horror at the seething mass of corruption below; at the death and decay from which they sprang. (55)

The scene moves from tranquillity to confusion; from the gentle falling of confetti-like petals, “rotating slowly in a continuous and perfumed stream”, to the violent intertwining of branches "interlaced in inextricable confusion”, fighting for survival; from the beauty of fecund natural life and “flamed immense red blossoms” to the desperate struggle against inevitable death and decay amidst the “seething mass of corruption below”.

[14] Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, p. 228.

On the few occasions that the action is flooded in bright light, it dazzles Almayer in the same way as he has been dazzled by Lingard's promises of wealth.

Almayer is never able to see the reality of his situation. When the tropical sunshine is mentioned, it is usually an ironic allusion to Almayer's inability to see important truths: the elements at work between his wife and his daughter after Nina's return from Singapore; the relations between the two lovers; the intention of Babalatchi who comes to poison him; the identity of the corpse in the river; the fact that he cannot erase the past by extinguishing its vestiges; and, ultimately, the inhumanity that triumphs with the rejection of love as Nina departs with Dain bound for Bali. The moon is almost as unsympathetic as the sun. Its cold rays brighten up the scene when the Dutch officers enjoy themselves at his expense during the shambolic dinner party that Almayer hosts. Once more we see Conrad's deft use of the description of a setting to enhance the understanding of character, as the following passage demonstrates:

> In the increasing light of the moon…a caricature of the sleeping Almayer appeared on the dirty whitewash of the wall behind him in a grotesquely exaggerated detail of attitude and feature enlarged to a heroic size. (118)

The elusive nature of reality and man's boundless capacity for misunderstanding is a critical notion which is skilfully handled through the narrative technique which Watt terms "delayed decoding".[15] Both the characters and the readers are kept constantly off balance as they attempt to interpret the action as it unfolds. Three examples serve to illustrate this sense of uncertainty and unease, the most effective and consequentially significant of these being the mistaken identity of the body found in the river following the night of the storm during which Dain visits Rajah Lakamba's

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[15] Ian Watt, '"Pink Toads and Yellow Curs"', pp. 11-31.

palace. Almayer is convinced that it is his business partner who has been crushed and drowned, only for it to subsequently become apparent, first to the reader and then to the hapless Almayer, that it is the purposely disfigured body of an anonymous boatman which has been dragged from the river. Further important misunderstandings include Dain's belief that Almayer has strong ties with the Dutch colonial authorities, when the reality is that his compatriots dismiss him as a misguided fool – a fool whose hospitality they are nonetheless still happy to accept, while treating him with disdain. Ironically it is they, and not the local community, who dub his house the eponymous "folly". Dain's courting of Almayer in business leads to his fateful relationship with the Dutchman's daughter, a change in motivation which eludes Almayer's understanding until it is too late. The reader is similarly deceived by Conrad's subversion of the traditional course of the romantic narrative into believing that it is the Thai "slave girl" Taminah, owned by Bulangi, who is responsible for Dain's "death". Conrad is able to amplify the level of uncertainty and unease by experimenting with shifting perspectives. This is evident from the scene in which Nina and Dain are together in the canoe, a moment which is first narrated from the perspective of Babalatchi and then from the that of the characters themselves.

The ironic tone of voice is one which has become closely associated with Conrad.[16] This is much in evidence in *Almayer's Folly* as the narrator's opinion of certain characters and institutions breaks through the purely objective narrative voice. As I will come on to discuss, such moments are important: they prompt us to interrogate to whom that voice might belong. However, for the present, let us stay focused upon the use of irony as a means of character enrichment and the key

[16] Paul B. Armstrong, 'The Politics of Irony in Reading Conrad', *Conradiana*, 26.2/3 (1994), 85-101.

theme of commerce, by referencing three examples. In Chapter Three we are given a glimpse into the narrator's implied cynicism about the schism in the Christian church as we read that:

> Mrs. Almayer had at least something tangible to cling to, but Nina, brought up under the Protestant wing of the proper Mrs. Vinke, had not even a little piece of brass to remind her of past teaching. (33)

The use of irony in this sentence is manifest in the idea of something as intangible as religious belief being made material in a piece of brass, a fungible precious metal similar to the gold with which Almayer is obsessed. The passage also hints at the idolatry of the Catholic faith. This tells the reader much about Nina and Mrs. Vinke, while also revealing something of the narrator's scepticism, perhaps even cynicism towards both branches of the Western church and by extension, institutional religion in general. We know from his letters that Conrad was not a believer.

In Chapter Five, irony is used to shine a light on Almayer's true folly as we become privy to his musings:

> In his mind's eye he saw the rich prize in his grasp; and with tin spoon in his hand, he was forgetting the plateful of rice before him in the fanciful arrangement of some splendid banquet to take place on his arrival in Amsterdam. (50)

The fact that Conrad deliberately specifies that the spoon is made of tin is surely no accident. In 1904, Malaysia was producing 52,000 tons of this commodity per annum. This represented more than half of the world's output. Borneo is rich in tin as well as gold, diamonds and coal.[17] As I have suggested, the logs that Almayer sees floating down the river may well have been felled to

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[17] Lim Chong Yah, *Economic Development of Modern Malaya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 388.

make way for mining activities aimed at exploiting such raw materials, tin as well as coal. There is rich irony in the image of Almayer eating with a tin spoon, while dreaming of the far more precious ore about which Lingard has told him. We are also reminded that Almayer plans to extract this commodity not just from the ground but also from the region itself, realizing its value for himself back in his native Holland; he is very much his mother's son.

Conrad's use of irony is not confined to the animation of Almayer's character. In Chapter Eleven the myth of the noble savage is exploded as we see Dain drawing his kris (a traditional Malay dagger often believed to possess magical powers) as he occupies himself while awaiting Nina's arrival. We observe him patrolling the jungle and hear his inner monologue as he imagines he is about to encounter his enemy, upon whom he will fearlessly pounce, ultimately dying in the attempt to defend his love. This heroic tableau is immediately uncut, as we see him, seconds later, tripping up and falling flat on his face.

We read:

> That would be the time: with a shout and a leap he would be in the midst of them, kriss in hand, killing, killing, killing, and would die with the shouts of his enemies in his ears, their warm blood spurting before his eyes. Carried away by the excitement, he snatched the kriss hidden in his sarong, and, drawing a long breath, rushed forward, struck at the empty air, and fell on his face. (126)

These examples each have significance beyond being purely pieces of technically adept writing, deployed to illuminate a specific incident or character trait. They also prompt us to ask "who is telling this story?" and to supplement this question by enquiring about their intentions and their values. It is to this critical area that I will now turn.

The central intellectual notion with which the narrator appears to be inviting us to engage is that of emotional "impressionability", one which, Kyler Schuller argues was still much in circulation in the nineteenth century and was yet to be entirely replaced by Darwinian thinking. Impressionability, was predicated upon the idea that various racial groups had different fixed potentialities to absorb the characteristics and sensibilities associated with Western civilization. Shuller expands as follows:

> The prison of biology can seem self-evident given black bodies were overwhelmingly dismissed as animalistic savages, Asian bodies as "enervated" and "stagnant" remnants of the past and Native bodies as animated fossils destined to go the way of the dinosaurs…..yet white bodies…..were ascribed with material agency and forward-moving temporality that had evolved the arts of civilization.[18]

In the context of *Almayer's Folly* this topic is framed in terms of both race and gender, and is embodied in Almayer's mixed-race daughter, Nina, one of Conrad's more finely wrought female characters. The deliberate contradiction at the heart of the novel is set up as the narrator tells us how the entrepreneurial Lingard, in the course of his trading activities, came to adopt Nina's mother, having plucked her as a child from her family of sea pirates, most of whom he had driven overboard to drown (8). This is perhaps the most acute use of irony to be found in the novel, demonstrating the blind arrogance of the supposedly civilised colonial mind. It is further endorsed in the emotionally arresting sentence:

> She watched all she held dear on earth after her own savage manner drift away into the gloom in a great roar of flame and smoke. (18)

[18] Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 12.

Later, her daughter Nina is judged to have “adapted herself wonderfully to the circumstances of her half-savage and miserable life.” (10)

Once again, the ironic tone is unmistakable.

Subsequent references to the assumed inherent savagery of the Malay race are so prevalent in the novel as to lay the author open to charges of heavy-handedness. The quotes that follow are but a selection of the most trenchantly expressed.

In Chapter Three, Taminah’s character is summed up as possessing that “strange resigned apathy of half-savage womankind”. The ironic echoing of the Farsi word for “strong woman” and the Malay word for earth in the name Taminah is surely no accident, revealing that, while not fluent in the Malay, Conrad had more than a passing acquaintance with some of its vocabulary and antecedents (30).

The character Dain is introduced in Chapter Four and described thus:

> The squareness of the lower jaw, the full red lips, the mobile nostrils, and the proud carriage of the head gave the impression of a being half-savage, untamed, perhaps cruel, and corrected the liquid softness of the almost feminine eye, that general characteristic of the race. (43)

The mixture of the purely physical (the squareness of the jaw) and the sensual (the full lips) and the juxtaposition of male and female imagery more than hint at the fetishism often associated with such stereotypes.

In Chapter Five, Nina’s emotional response is portrayed in terms of “her soul again lapsing into the savage mood, which the genius of civilization working by the hand of Mrs. Vinck could never

destroy" (52). The economic "genius of civilization" is an early example of the use of irony to convey Conrad's own attitude to the true nature of "civilization".

In the same chapter her mother is heard "speaking with all the rude eloquence of a savage nature giving itself up without restraint to an over mastering passion."

In the penultimate chapter Almayer exclaims:

> What have they done to you, your mother and that man? What made you give yourself up to that savage? For he is a savage. Between him and you there is a barrier that nothing can remove. (113)

Once again, we sense the dexterity of Conrad's use of irony as Almayer is speaking of a man he had earlier described as "a perfect gentleman – a perfect gentleman" (16). The notion of the English or Dutch gentleman was one that the reader of the day would have readily recognised and associated with the notion of cultivated, civilised man.

These passages remind us of the themes that Conrad was to explore in his most famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, in which he encourages the reader to reflect upon the nature and values of supposedly civilised Western Europeans engaged in the business of trade. This is perhaps best captured in the closing pages of 'An Outpost of Progress':

> The Managing Director of the Great Civilizing Company (since we know civilization follows trade) landed first, and incontinently lost sight of the steamer.[19]

[19] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, p. 25.

The irony of the observation regarding civilisation following trade could not be more thinly disguised or more "knowing". In this instance it leaves the reader in little doubt that they are hearing the authentic voice of the author.

Throughout *Almayer's Folly* the identity of the narrator is less clear. This ambiguity leads us to draw the default conclusion that it is most probably Conrad's own voice and opinions that we are hearing. However, such a conclusion has to be tempered with some caution. The reason for this is that the divergent views expressed by the narrator are so variable, and at times contradictory, as to make it almost impossible to attribute them to one credible individual. For all the talk of savagery, we also encounter comments such as the following in the context of Nina's dispatch to Singapore for her education:

> Perhaps had she known of the high walls, the quiet gardens, and the silent nuns of the Samarang convent, where her destiny was leading her, she would have sought death in her dread and hate of such a restraint. (19)

Likewise, we read:

> To her resolute nature, however, after these years, the savage and uncompromising sincerity of purpose shown by her Malay kinsmen seemed at last preferrable to the sleek hypocrisy, to the polite disguises, to the virtuous pretences of such white people as she had had the misfortune to come into contact. (35)

However, we also find the narrator poking fun at the pretentions of Lakamba as the Rajah listens to an extract of a Verdi opera repeating endlessly on his primitive mechanical organ box (67). Notwithstanding the patronising wit of the passage, we must also acknowledge, along with GoGwilt, that while Lakamba's love of Verdi may raise questions of musical taste it does gesture

towards a greater cultural openness than Almayer ever displays.[20] Meanwhile Almayer's Chinese neighbour, Jim-Eng, is described in typically stereotypical terms as the Dutchman sees him "stretched on a pile of cool mates, a wooden pillow under his head, an opium pipe in his nerveless fingers" (23). There is, of course, further irony in this image as it foreshadows Almayer's own miserable demise, the victim of his own folly but also that of the opium that Jim-Eng has sold him for commercial gain.

It may have been the use of such caricatures to evoke the image of the savage Malay ("the Other") which led Homi Bhabha to formulate his 1990 concept of the stereotype, which he articulates as:

> an ambivalent structure that is one of the most significant discursive and physical strategies of discriminatory power – whether racist or sexist, peripheral or metropolitan. This notion of ambivalence is central to the stereotype for it gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctions.[21]

The latter part of the statement is particularly pertinent, as Conrad goes on in later novels to explore racial "stereotypes" in different contexts and geographies, perhaps most controversially in *Heart of Darkness* (121). It is also arguable that it is his use of such stereotypes as a narrative device which enables him to achieve such economy in *Almayer's Folly*. The stereotype allows the reader to bring, and hopefully question, his or her own prejudices and perceptions to their reading of the work. Of course, it may also indicate a lack of intimate knowledge of, or preoccupation with, other races. Whatever the underpinning, it did enable Conrad to focus upon broader themes, such as

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[20] GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya*, pp. 43-53.

[21] Homi K Bhabha, 'The Other Question: Stereotype and Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by K. M. Newton (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 293-301 (p. 295).

humankind's nebulous and vulnerable place in a world increasingly governed by commercial imperatives beyond their control.

In the characters of Nina and Almayer we see the impact of such forces upon specific individuals. Both of them are unmoored from any clearly defined "home" culture: Almayer on account of his perception that he has been cut adrift by his Dutch compatriots as a result of marrying a Malay woman; and Nina due to the prejudice she encounters as a Eurasian while being educated in British-held Singapore. As previously stated, it is surprisingly, bearing in mind this was his first novel, that it is in the drawing of Nina's character that Conrad comes closest to seeing the world from the perspective of a non-white European. Although, *Almayer's Folly* (like *Lord Jim* and *Victory*) is unquestionably the tragedy of a Western white man adrift in Asia, none of Conrad's other female characters in the Asian works are as finely observed by Conrad. It is Nina who articulates the critical issue of racial division, a theme to which Conrad was to return in the later novels, as she exclaims to her father:

> I am not of your race, between you and your people and me there is a barrier that nothing can remove. (113)

Almayer, like Lingard, deludes himself that wealth derived from trade and commerce can overcome such racial difference and prejudice, a belief he explains thus:

> I wanted to see white men bowing low before the power of your beauty and your wealth. I wished to seek a strange land, a civilization to which I am a stranger, so as to find a new life in the contemplation of your high fortunes, of your triumphs, of your happiness. For that I bore patiently the burden of work, of disappointment, of humiliation amongst these savages here, and I had it all nearly in my grasp. (77)

These three sentences perfectly express his commercial motivations, drivers which have resulted in him being alienated both from his own people and from those with whom he has sought to make his (and Nina's) fortune. Like the logs he observes being subjected to the random currents of the Sambir river, he is adrift. The juxtaposition of the phrases "a civilization to which I am a stranger" and "amongst these savages" perfectly reflect his conflicted and untethered condition.

Ironically, it is the usually unperceptive Almayer who inadvertently reveals during his tirade against his Dutch dinner guests that it is ultimately the dispassionate forces of commercialism, and not imperialism, that have determined his fate – these and his own hubris:

> '…. disloyalty and unscrupulousness! What have you ever done to make me loyal? *You have no grip on this country* (italics added). I had to take care of myself, and when I asked for protection, I was met with threats and contempt, and had Arab slander thrown in my face! I, a white man.' (104)

*Almayer's Folly* presents the reader with a tantalizing conundrum. Rich in the evocative, ironic and image-laden writing which were to become Conrad's hallmarks, it is the ideal point of departure in the search for the elusive Josef Korzeniowski and that promised glimpse of the truth. Ultimately, it is in the narrative voice (or voices) that we must search for the answers to the question set out in the objective of this thesis. In the single omniscient narrative voice adopted by Conrad for much of his debut, do we discern signs of a mind primarily preoccupied with the fate of the European trader/adventurer as he casts himself adrift into an unknown culture; do we at times hear the expression of genuinely held views about the relative merits of different cultures; or do we detect a more sophisticated strategy at work, one which plays upon the reader's own prejudices? These are questions that I will seek to resolve in the coming pages. However, I contend that the central unifying theme, previewed in *Almayer's Folly*, and explored further in Conrad's

major Asian novels, is that of the parlous state of the individual in a random and callous universe which is driven by the largely unseen and sometimes random forces of trade and commerce. In this universe, the often value-free imperatives and deceptions of business are the key drivers of humankind's fate, toying with us as the river does with the mysterious logs caught in its currents.

Did Conrad perhaps have Shakespeare's Gloucester in mind when he crafted the one-eyed Babalachi, a character who sees more than most in *Almayer's Folly*? We do know that Conrad had a deep knowledge and respect for Shakespeare. Could Gloucester's words have been in his thoughts as he wrote ironically of Almayer's pathetic death in Jim-Eng's "The House of Heavenly Delight"? (154).

'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: they kill us for their sport'.[22]

In *Almayer's Folly* we gain a glimpse of Conrad's literary mission, a mission which had the professed aim of "making us see". [23] I will explore in the chapters which follow the notion that in Conrad's godless world it is the amoral forces of trade, coupled with the irrepressible human instinct for commercial gain, which govern the fate of his characters. This is a notion that Conrad was to animate in another geography and articulate through the words of Dr. Monygham in *Nostromo*:

> There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law, and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and it is inhuman; It is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle. Mrs. Gould the time approaches when all that the Gould Concession stands for

[22] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by Jay Halio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 83.
[23] Conrad, *The Narcissus,* p. xiv.

> shall weigh as heavily upon the people as the barbarism, cruelty, and misrule of a few years back.[24]

I argue that it is these material interests, illusorily marshalled under the European colonial model, which Conrad sees as driving forces beyond the grasp of humankind. In so doing, I will also demonstrate Conrad's Western bias and how it is revealed primarily through his abiding preoccupation with his European protagonists.

[24] Conrad, *Nostromo*, p. 366.

## Chapter Five: The Commerce of Human Relationships: *Lord Jim*

> To all those who wish to understand how the Dutch now govern Java, and how it is that they are enabled to derive a large annual revenue from it, while the population increases, and the inhabitants are contented, I recommend the study of Mr. Money's excellent and interesting work.
>
> Alfred Russel Wallace, 'How to Manage a Colony', in *The Malay Archipelago.*[1]

This chapter examines the representation of trade and commerce in *Lord Jim* in order to elaborate upon Conrad's attitudes towards the British and Dutch commercial colonialist models. It focuses on three specific areas. Firstly, it examines the commercial underpinnings of concubinage and its relevance to Conrad's characterisation of Jewel. Secondly, it explores Conrad's portrayal of Jim's and Stein's characters and their complex relationships with the commercial world of management, regulation and business. Lastly, it examines the instruments of colonial control and power exercised in the *fin de siècle* as the British and the Dutch vied for suzerainty over the Malay Archipelago. In doing so, I suggest that echoes of these same instruments may still be discerned in the structures and behaviours apparent within modern multinational companies, thereby demonstrating Conrad's prescience and enduring relevance. A melding of these three perspectives reveals that, while Conrad's perspective was limited in scope and predominantly Western in orientation, his portrayal of Jim's conflicted position in the commercial colonial landscape discloses much about the implications of asymmetric and scaled globalised trade.

[1] Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 73.

*Lord Jim* is often regarded as the most romantic of Conrad's Asian novels. This is an assumption of which the reader should be wary in a novel of such complex impressionistic qualities that it led George Waddington to state that it defies categorical interpretation.[2] The source of that oft-perceived romantic quality is manifest in a number of ways: Jim's romantic and self-deluding image of himself as a Western gentleman and hero; Jim's romance with Jewel; and Marlow's romantic view of Jim as a fundamentally good, but ill-fated character, with whom Marlow finds himself increasingly sympathetic, even as he seemingly attempts to distance himself from Jim for reasons of his own. There is also Conrad's romance with Jim. This is particularly pertinent, giving the strong sense that there is no other Conradian character with whom the author is so deeply engaged. It is as though the writer is wrestling to understand the true motivations of the man he has created and yet, even as he wrestles, he realises that such are the complexities of Man that the task may prove impossible. This impression is emphasised as the omniscient narrator of the first part of the novel remarks of the trial sequence:

> They wanted facts. Facts. They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything! (21).

Ultimately, Jim remains mysterious, as seen through a mist:

> that mist in which he loomed interesting if not very big, with floating outlines – a straggler yearning inconsolably for his humble place in the ranks…...It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering and

[2] George Waddington, 'That "Wonderful" Man, Mr. Stein', *The Conradian*, 36.1/2 (2004), 99-110 (p. 108).

> misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. (162)

As Ian Watt argues in regard to *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's use of impressionistic language to reveal his central characters invites us to experience them as in some sense symbolic and suggestive of something beyond the bounds of the immediate narrative, as if they contain a surplus of meaning.[3] However, unlike more overtly symbolic novels, which encourage the reader to identify symbols which then lead inward to a deeper central and singular meaning, Conrad's technique is to alert us to a broader relevance for his tales, which take us outwards into a larger more uncertain and threatening reality. The impressionistic portrayal of Jim also has the effect of forcing us to look more closely at the man in an attempt to get a clearer picture. In so doing, we find ourselves implicated, sensing that we might also have caught a glimpse of our own selves in his make up.[4]

In none of the other major Asian works are we encouraged to such an extent to attempt to decipher the contradictory make-up of a character who elusively occupies the dark heart of the novel. This in itself tells us something about the obsessive nature of Conrad's pessimistic preoccupation with the notion of the deracinated Westerner adrift in an alien, foreign world. The reader's interest is stimulated further by the use of the arresting phrase: "he loomed interesting if not very big…. yearning inconsolably for his humble place in the ranks" (162). The description nods towards the possibility of Jim as an everyman, for we are told that in reality he was a man of substantial physical build.  Regardless of Jim's role, there is no escaping his centrality.

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[3] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales.*

[4] Ian Watt, 'Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*', in *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration*, ed. by Norman Sherry (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1976), 37-53.

Given this complexity, the reader is well advised to eschew an over-simplistic or romantic reading of the novel. This wariness is further justified by the nature of Marlow's testimony, for this is a narrator whose views are often superficial and based upon surface impressions. In speaking of his first encounter with Jim, Marlow describes him thus: "I liked his appearance, I know his appearance; he came from the right place; he was one of us." (32)

However, there is one other character of critical importance to an understanding of the work who we might easily overlook: the collector-entrepreneur Stein. As John Peters argues, "although a minor character in terms of the amount of narrative space Conrad affords him, Stein's presence in *Lord Jim* has an enormous impact on the world of the novel".[5] Robert Hampson observes that Stein represents a shift in the narrative perspective from a way of thinking that rejects Jim as a failure to one that casts him in a more sympathetic light.[6] This seemingly untainted individual is almost certainly modelled on Alfred Russel Wallace, the naturalist, explorer, geographer, anthropologist, biologist and illustrator. It was Wallace who also independently conceived the theory of evolution through natural selection. He conducted extensive fieldwork in the Malay Archipelago, where he identified the faunal divide now termed the "Wallace Line", which separates the Indonesian archipelago into two distinct regions: a western portion, in which the animals are largely of Asian origin, and an eastern portion, where the fauna reflects Australasia. He recorded his findings on the subject in *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), one of the mayor scientific tracts of its day and a particular favourite of Conrad's.[7] The novelist used this work as the source for much of the background information about the topography, flora and fauna of the

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[5] John Peters, 'Order and Chaos in *Lord Jim*', *The Conradian,* 28.1 (1996), 48-53.
[6] Robert Hampton, *Cross-cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).
[7] Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago.*

lands in which he set his Asian novels. It might be said that, while Wallace explored the territory by land, encountering both its human, animal, insect and plant life, Conrad remained at a distance, afloat on the South China Sea or plying the Malacca Straights, relying upon secondary sources to construct his imagined Asian reality.

In creating the character of Stein, Conrad presents the possibility of an idealised marriage of the detached, selfless scientist and the engaged, energetic man of commerce. However, as I will demonstrate in the second part of this chapter, an interrogation of the world of botany and its relationship with commercial agriculture during the Dutch colonial period reveals problematic implications, particularly as it relates to Stein's motivations and values. The juxtaposition of my discussion of the secondary characters of Jewel and Stein is deliberate: both are revealing of two important aspects of colonial commercialism. In the case of Jewel we are shown a character caught up in the system of concubinage, an institution that sought to commodify women and to rob them of agency. By contrast, in Stein we encounter a man in command of his environment, whose business and leisure pursuits are concerned with the exploitation and marshalling of nature's valuable commodities for self-interested commercial ends.

I will deal first with the character of Jewel and the practice of concubinage in the Dutch East Indies of the late-nineteenth century. Although Jewel is cast in the shadow of the dominating "Tuan" Jim, and is developed less vividly than Nina in *Almayer's Folly*, her backstory highlights the critical role of women and the institution of concubinage to the world in which *Lord Jim* is set. Manifest in the figure of the concubine there is a unique convergence of issues, specifically those concerning perspectives, institutions and commerce. The matter of perspective is integral to my thoughts on Conrad's predominantly Western view of Asia, while the institutional and commercial dimensions

are crucial to the exploration of the pervasive influence of colonial commercialism with which Conrad engages.

Andrew Francis sheds valuable light on the parlous state of Asian women such as Jewel who formed relationships with Western men, while also drawing attention to how Conrad uses this aspect of commercial colonial life to demonstrate the flaws in Jim's character. He writes:

> Jim's failure to keep faith with his calling echoes doubts surrounding the keeping of faith between European men and indigenous women, as between Jim and Jewel, in relationships that ultimately arise from colonization and trade. [8]

Citing the work of R. B. Cribb and A. Cahin, Francis describes how, in the times of the Dutch East Indies Company, formal marriage between Europeans and Indonesians was strongly discouraged and sometimes prohibited.[9] Building on the work of Ann Stoler, he scrutinises this facet of Dutch colonial life to reveal its coldly pragmatic commercial underpinnings.[10]

As it was rare for Dutch women to migrate to Indonesia, most Dutch men conducted permanent or semi-permanent liaisons with Indonesian or other Asian women. While some of these relationships would undoubtedly have been loving and caring, there is no ignoring the strong element of commerciality and imbalance inherent in many such unions. This was most painfully apparent in the legal status afforded to any children that were born as a result of these liaisons. If the Dutch colonial manager chose to recognise his progeny, they would be granted European status. In so

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[8] Andrew Francis, '"You always leave us – for your own ends": Marriage and Concubinage in Conrad's Asian Fiction', *The Conradian*, 35. 2 (2010), 46-62 (p. 48). Also: Francis, *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction*, pp. 96-103 (p. 96).
[9] R. B. Cribb and Audre Cahin, *Historical Dictionary of Indonesia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), p. 285.
[10] Ann Laura Stoler, 'A Sentimental Education: Native Servants and the Cultivation of European Children in the Netherlands Indies', in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. by Laura J. Sears (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 71-92.

doing, the mother lost all legal claim to her offspring, The child could then be taken back to the Netherlands at the end of the father's tour of duty in Indonesia. As Francis points out, this aspect of Dutch colonial legal practice forms a critical narrative thread in the first two volumes of Pramoedya's *Buru Quartet,* a dimension that will be explored further in chapter seven of this thesis.[11]

Francis draws upon the work of Stoler to reveal the commercial underpinning of concubinage, the latter describes the reality of the status of the concubine as follows:

> If glossed as companionship or cohabitation outside marriage, it suggests more social privilege than most women who were involved in such relations would have enjoyed. They could be dismissed without reason, notice, or severance pay. They might be exchanged among Europeans and "passed on" when men left for leave or retirement in Europe. The Indies Civil Code of 1848 made their position poignantly clear: native women "had no rights over children recognized by a white man".

Stoler also makes plain the commercial benefits that accrued to the colonial operator:

> For the middling colonial staff, the East Indies Company firmly discouraged Euro-Asian marriages. Households based on Euro-Asian unions, by contrast, were seen to bear distinct advantages. Individual employees would bear the cost of dependents, mixed unions would produce healthier children, and Asian women would make fewer financial and affective demands. Finally, men would be more likely to remain if they established families with local roots.[12]

[11] Francis, 'Marriage and Concubinage', p. 49
[12] Francis, 'Marriage and Concubinage', p. 49.

> Concubinage served colonial interests in other ways. It permitted permanent settlement and rapid growth by cheaper means than the importation of European women. Salaries of European recruits to the colonial armies, bureaucracies, plantation companies, and trading enterprises were carefully calibrated and kept artificially low (….) by the nineteenth century concubinage was the most prevalent living arrangement for European men. Nearly half of the Indies' European male population in the 1880s were unmarried and living with Asian women.[13]

The unhappy outcomes of this system play an important role in the central narratives of both *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands.* In the former, Almayer's motivation for marrying Lingard's adopted Malay daughter is cynically commercial. He sees the union as being an easy route to laying his hands on her father's fortune and, when this proves to be illusory he soon comes to resent and disparage his wife, regarding her as an unwanted chattel. The reader understands the fraught nature of the Almayers' marital relationship from the opening pages of the novel, as we hear the Dutchman's wife bark 'Kaspar! Makan!'.[14] Later his wife turns the contractual tables on Almayer, reminding him:

> 'You know, Kaspar, I am your wife! your own Christian wife under your own Blanda law!' For she knew that this was the bitterest thing of all; the greatest regret of that man's life.[15]

In the case of *An Outcast of the Islands,* set around fifteen years prior to *Almayer's Folly,* we encounter another weak Westerner, the immoral Peter Willems. He owes his initial social standing

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[13] Ann Laura Stoler, 'A Sentimental Education, p. 91.
[14] Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*, p. 1.
[15] Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*, p. 35.

and large house to the fact that he has married a woman whom he believes to be Portuguese. However, he is subsequently enlightened by Lingard (after Willems has been fired by his employer Hudig, whom he has defrauded) that he had been tricked into marrying this woman, who was in fact Hudig's illegitimate mixed-race daughter. Finding himself impoverished, and his wife now of no commercial value, he discards her and, in so doing, unwittingly becomes susceptible to Babalachi's scheming and the temptation of romance with Aissa, the daughter of a deceased local potentate. Both of the women involved in these transactions are treated as fungible, trading commodities. However, in a typical trope of dark Conradian irony, in the denouement of the novel, it is Aissa who shoots and kills Willems.

Francis observes that "Jewel's family history can be a little confusing". [16] His forensic reading of the text provides insight into the fragile position of the concubine and Eurasian women in a fluid, hybrid society governed by the rigidity of the supposedly just and righteous rule of Dutch "*Blanda*" commercial law. The fact that Conrad chooses to name her after a valuable trading commodity is surely both deliberate and ironic. Francis points out that we are told her grandfather was "a white; a high official"; as it is not clear whether he was married to Jewel's grandmother, it seems most probable that she was a *nyai*. This relationship resulted in the birth of Jewel's mother, a "very good-looking Malay", the term indicating her grandmother's race (159). We are told that Jewel's mother was educated; however, we do not learn whether she was ever recognized by Jewel's father and thereby given equal or European status. What we do know is that Jewel was taught to read and write, a fact which gives her relationship with Jim credible grounding.

[16] Francis, 'Marriage and Concubinage', pp. 55-56.

Most pertinent in the context of this examination of the consequences of the system of concubinage, is the fact that Jewel's mother, after her separation from Jewel's father, was left in an isolated position within the Patusan community, with "no other companion, confidant, and friend but her daughter" (200). As Francis points out, we never learn whether Jewel's parents were married or whether her mother was a *nyai*, however, the fact that her mother goes on to marry Cornelius suggests that the latter was the more likely case. Although never made explicit, there is a strong suggestion that her father was white, with phrases such as "the merciless pressures" to which Jewel's parents were subject, indicating that inter-racial sexual relations were becoming increasingly taboo (200).[17]

Focussing on the commercial aspects of *Lord Jim* gives a fresh understanding of and purchase on, not only of the system of concubinage but also its broader implications for those bound up in its web. We see clearly how any system that reduces a person to a mere commodity, to be exchanged or disposed of based on needs, circumstances or machinations, is by definition dehumanising. Conrad evidently had an understanding of both the system and its consequences. His sympathetic treatment of the character of Jewel is made plain in her poignant words to Marlow, in reference to Jim: "He has left me (….) you always leave us – for your own ends" (252). However, it would be simplistic to suggest that Conrad sees this outcome as merely the inevitable product of a deeply flawed system. The complex history of Jewel's family allows at least for the possibility that some of her ancestors had enduring mixed-race relationships sustained by love.

There is also the example of Stein's marriage to a Malay Princess, who has subsequently died in circumstances which are not made plain. This union is rendered in sentimental romantic prose with

[17] Francis, 'Marriage and Concubinage', pp. 46-62.

no hint of Conradian scepticism (159). Similarly, there is the case of Jorgenson's enduring relationship with a local woman in *The Rescue* (1920). In this instance, the portrayal is more grounded and less emotional, with his partner being described as "old beyond her years". It is perhaps revealing that we are never told her name.[18]

Conrad's complex portrayal of the various relationships that could arise in this environment may negate an over-simplistic critiquing of the corrupting nature of the colonial system. However, the sense remains of Jewel's narrative being primarily in the service of the detailed study of Jim's conflicted character. For all the sympathy that we develop for Jewel and her predicament, there is little effort made during the development of the narrative to enter into her psyche and to see her relationship with Jim from her perspective. We are only given a glimpse of her view after his death. This is in contrast with the sophistication and complexity that Conrad invests throughout the novel in the Marlow-Jim relationship, where the dissonance between Marlow's oral and written narrative encourages us to question what might be motivating Marlow's telling of Jim's tale. Again, we encounter an example of Conrad's preoccupation with his Western creations. In the case of the Jim-Jewel relationship, once he has "left", as a result of his death at the hand of Doramin, we simply learn that she takes refuge with Stein. Conrad uses her as an instrument to enhance our understanding of the deceptively sympathetic nature of Stein's character (259).

It is indicative of the detached nature of Conrad's relationship with South East Asia that, once his days in the merchant navy were over, he never returned to the region to visit or to conduct further research, let alone to live. To use the Dutch lexicon of colonialism referred to in the introduction of this thesis, he fell into the category of a *trekker* (a transitory expat) as opposed to a *bliver* (one

[18] Conrad, *The Rescue*, pp. 94, 352.

who made Indonesia his home). In this respect he was a world apart from his creation Jim, who "could never go home now", the implication being that his actions in deserting the pilgrims aboard the *Patna* had put him beyond the pale in terms of the hypercritical morality of the colonialists (57, 161 and 239). This is reflected in the words of Brierley:

> I don't care a snap for all the pilgrims that ever came out of Asia, but a decent man would not have behaved like this to a full cargo of old rags in bales. (49)

Again, the language of trade is used, this time to equate the pilgrims with the commodity of textiles tied up in "bales". Conrad, as a former merchant seaman, was clearly aware of the growing trade in cloth for the reference to "old rags" is echoed in *Heart of Darkness,* where a:

> stream of manufactured goods, *rubbishy cottons* [italics added], beads, and brass-wire set off into the depths of darks, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory.[19]

Jim's inability to return home also strikes a broader note: Conrad seems to suggest that once the commercial forces of colonialism had been let loose their consequences would endure.

I turn now to consider Jim and Stein and their relationship with the business of commerce. While Jim appears to be happy to take advantage of Jewel's love for him, he shows no indication that he ever intends to marry her, and thereby change her status in the eyes of the Dutch colonial social and legal system. By contrast, he is portrayed as having every intention of attempting to change both the traditional local regulatory regime, along with the type of established agriculture practiced by the people of Patusan. Marlow describes Jim rather admiringly: "He regulated so many things in Patusan! (160) The term "regulated" is a pointed reminder of the activities of the White Rajahs of Malaya, such as James and Charles Brooke, who sought to establish a British form of

[19] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, p. 21.

administration, with the objective of creating a free trade environment. Indeed, by the values of the day, both James and Charles Brooke would have appeared as enlightened, particularly in light of their paternalistic regard for the protection of local customs. We know that Conrad was fascinated by James Brooke (311).[20] He and his successors were also committed to the abolition of local monopolistic practices and the promotion of direct trading links between producers and their overseas customer, cutting out the middlemen who had historically taken a disproportionate percentage of the value chain. However, it must be noted that the trade in antimony, coal, gold and opium was always conducted for the benefit of the British Empire in a zero-sum contest with the Dutch. Tax income from the trade in antimony may have been deployed with probity, but it was kept firmly in the hands of the Brookes. The idea that the local population would ever be capable of governing themselves was anathema.

Marlow's introduction of Stein and his engagement in the world of botany is also loaded with commercial significance: there were close links between the Dutch and British interests in things botanical due to the role played by this seemingly innocent scientific pursuit in the extraction of wealth from their colonies. It is no accident that Indonesia was for many years referred to as "The Spice Islands". Such a name was not born of a poetic sensibility but rather from hard-nosed commercialism. As previously observed, at the turn of the century the Dutch exchequer drew a third of its income from Indonesian agricultural activities.[21] Marlow informs us that:

[20] John Gordan, 'The Rajah Brooke and Joseph Conrad', *Studies in Philology*, 35 (1938), 613-34.
[21] Gordon, 'How Big was Indonesia's "Real" Colonial Surplus in 1878-1941?'

> The few big trees had been felled, the undergrowth had been cut down and the grass fired. He had a mind to try a coffee-plantation there. The big hill, rearing its double summit coal-black in the clear yellow prepared for that experiment (234).

Jim's "owner's eye" indicates his own plans to convert Patusan's trade and agriculture into a one based on the plantation system (180). Not only would this transform the landscape, but it would harness the productivity of the land to the colonial economic model. A coffee plantation is a profoundly different form of agriculture from one that merely satisfies local needs and in which indigenous inhabitants cultivate land for food primarily to feed themselves, any small excess production being sold to local store owners. A plantation requires the organisation of labour and the exchange of that labour for cash; it represents a stepping-stone toward the development of globalised trade, where economies of scale and low-cost production satisfy world markets. Jim's idea of a coffee plantation was certainly not an opportunity for the improvement of the lot of the people of Patusan.

To read that Jim is considering coffee as the crop of choice for his plantation should give the reader pause. As Mark Pendergast points out, coffee was the first commodity to be traded internationally.[22] The genesis of this trade is discernible in Jim's agricultural "experiment". This in turn evokes the Dutch agricultural experiment at Buitenzorg. The choice of coffee also recalls its tainted history in Indonesia, as this was one of the crops introduced to the country under the "Compulsory Cultivation System of Java", which was imposed under the "Forced Delivery System" in other regions of the Archipelago, including Sumatra. Significantly, "Forced Delivery" production of coffee had been introduced to West Sumatra in 1847 (the island on which several

[22] Pendergast, *Uncommon Grounds*, pp. 64-65.

academics believe Patusan to be modelled). Under this scheme, the coffee grower was denied any of the up-side price or margin potential that a free market might provide, as he was forced to grow a specific crop and to sell it at a price dictated by his one and only customer.

Marlow admires Jim's entrepreneurial spirit and his "shrewdness" (234). However, the historical context of the "Forced Delivery System" further problematises the very foundation of the Western notion of business enterprise. An understanding of the commercial agenda of the colonial project enhances our appreciation of the historical reality of the times and leads us to question any idea that Jim was solely motivated by a desire to do right by the people who looked up to him as their leader. He is inevitably implicated in the system of colonial exploitation.

Jim's interest in Chester's guano venture casts further doubt over his character and motivations. The guano industry was notorious for the appalling conditions in which its employees had to work. This seems to be of little concern to Chester, as he declares "I'm going to dump forty coolies there – if I've to steal 'em." (120). He clearly expects Jim to be armed and to enforce work and order. The fact that Chester has had to go as far afield as Hobart, in southern Australia, to get shareholder funding for his venture gives further cause for concern. The implication is that Chester assumed that distance would ensure any prospective investor would have little knowledge of the means by which they would earn a return on their investment, let alone the risks to which the workers, press-ganged into harvesting the guano, were exposed.

Brown is another malevolent trader, believing that "the smuggling of a few guns was no great crime" (281). Brown's intentions on Patusan are ironically described in commercial terms: "He had done that kind of thing before – in the way of business" (259), a remark which foregrounds the ambivalence towards commerce expressed in the novel. His attitude – "the land already seemed

to be his to tear to pieces, squeeze and throw away" (269) – mirrors the colonial rapacity encountered in *Heart of Darkness*.

Against this portrayal of commerce and Jim's problematic relationship with its practices, Conrad places the character of Stein. As the critic Tony Tanner observes, Stein occupies a central place in the novel.[23] His scientific studies and reflective character, as evoked by "his student's face" (146), communicate the sense of a lifetime engaged in activities which had developed a certain sensitivity in his make-up. As previously noted, Stein had been married to a local princess who had died tragically young, a contextualisation surely intended to elicit our sympathy. By some strange alchemy, he appears to have found a serendipitous balance between his trading and scientific interests. We sense that of all of the characters in *Lord Jim*, and indeed the other Asian novels, Stein is the man who comes closest to representing Conrad's vision of an idealised foreign adventurer. He is a man who has suffered and yet endured; he remains engaged and yet uncorrupted. He is a trader but also a collector. Unlike Jim's involvement in the hand-crippling business of guano collection or coffee picking, Stein's touch is light, a characteristic reflected in his "pat[ting]" of Jewel's hand at the end of chapter thirty-seven when she believes Jim to have abandoned her. We go on to read the following exchange:

> "What have I done?" she asked with her lips only.
>
> "You always mistrusted him" I said.
>
> "He was like the others" she pronounced slowly.
>
> "Not like the others" I protested, but she continued evenly, without any feeling –

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[23] Tony Tanner, *Conrad*: *Lord Jim* (London: Taylor, Arnold, 1963).

> "He was false" And suddenly Stein broke in. "No! no! no! My poor child!..." He patted her hand lying passively on his sleeve (254).

The passage is revealing of a number of important aspects of the three characters involved in the exchange, Jewel, Marlow and Stein. We see Jewel's unspoken realisation that she has allowed herself to be controlled by Jim, willingly falling into a form of concubinage. She suddenly sees Jim in the context of the colonial institution in which they are both playing predictable, prescribed roles. In the case of Marlow, his poor and unreliable judgement is revealed in the groundless generalisation of "you always mistrusted him". Most importantly, in view of this examination of Stein's character, we are shown a man invested in maintaining the colonial illusion that the likes of Jim were motivated by selflessness and all along had the interests of local people like Jewel at heart. This is conveyed in the patronising "my poor child" and Stein's light but self-conscious patting of Jewel's "passive" hand.

Indeed, Stein is strongly associated with colonial interests. His place in the Wajo States is not dissimilar to Jim's in Patusan, both being reminiscent of Brooke and the White Rajahs in terms of the control that they exercised. Stein is a part of a fledgling multi-island, and perhaps multi-national, organisation. He has a partner, with whom he shares the risk of his trading operation, which has outposts in the Moluccas and many other trading posts. The language Marlow uses to describe Stein's collecting activities also echoes that of colonialism: we are informed that "Stein never failed to annex on his own account every butterfly or beetle he could lay his hands on" (148). The monetary value of his collection of insects is emphasized: when a butterfly is put back into its display case "the automatic lock clicked sharply" (153). The link between scientific research and subsequent agricultural exploitation cannot be ignored. The colonised world is seen as comprising

objects which have an economic value; botany and collecting are essential adjuncts of the colonial project. Indeed, Stein's collection of insects might easily have been described as a colony.

The problematic nature of Stein's behaviour comes into even sharper focus when we reflect upon the attitudes towards the natural world of the man on whom he was likely modelled. In the *The Malay Archipelago*, Alfred Russel Wallace writes in a chapter entitled "Borneo – The Orang-utan":

> On the fourth day, however, we found a Mias (local name for the Orang-utan) feeding on a very lofty Durian tree, and succeeded in killing it, after eight shots. Unfortunately, it remained in the tree, hanging by its hands, and we were obliged to leave it and return home, as it was several miles off. As I felt pretty sure it would fall during the night, I returned to the place early the next morning, and found it on the ground beneath the tree. To my astonishment and pleasure, it appeared to be a different kind from any I had yet seen: for although a full-grown male by its fully developed teeth and very large canines, it had no sign of the lateral protuberance on the face, and was about one-tenth smaller in all its dimension than the other adult males. The upper incisors, however, appeared to be broader than in the larger species, a character distinguishing the Simia Morio of Professor Own, which he had described from the cranium of a female specimen. As it was too far to carry the animal home, I set to work and skinned the body on the spot, leaving the head hands and feet attached, to be finished at home. This specimen is now in the British Museum.[24]

*Pace* the cold objectification of the orang-utan and the suffering almost certainly endured by the poor animal as it clung onto life through the night before dying and falling to the jungle floor, the

[24] Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago,* p. 42.

passage is horribly evocative of the phrenology advocated by Franz Joseph Gall in the late 1700s, and practiced on Tutsis and Hutus by the Belgium colonialists during their rule over what is now Rwanda.[25] The passage disturbingly reveals how the colonial mind commodified living beings and annexed them to its own ends. How easy it must have been for such a mindset, which took it as axiomatic that the white man was of a superior species, to de-humanise "others" from different races. This opinion is given further weight when we read of Wallace's attitudes towards head-hunting and slavery in a chapter entitled "Borneo – The Dyaks":

> …and head-hunting is a custom originating in the petty wars of village with village, and tribe with tribe, which no more implies a bad moral character than did the custom of the slave-trade a hundred years ago imply want of general morality in all who participated in it.[26]

What are we to draw from this analysis of the text about Conrad's intent and what does he, perhaps unintentionally, reveal about his own attitudes and values? By reading *Lord Jim* through the lens of Western commercialism we are able to discern most clearly Conrad's agenda while at the same time identifying a possible blind spot. It is evident that he perceives the inequities of capitalism as manifest in the likes of Chester's guano enterprise or Brown's callous attitude towards the lives of local people. However, in his characterisation of Stein, we sense that Conrad may have let his guard slip for a moment to reveal that he does allow for the possibility of an ostensibly sensitive Westerner to find a place in Asia, intrigued perhaps by the enthusiasm for the scientific work of Wallace, which he so admired.

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[25] Franz Joseph Gall, *On the Function of the Brain and each of its Parts: With Observations on the Possibility of Determining the Instincts, Propensities and Talents, or Moral and Intellectual Dispositions of Men and Animals, by the Configuration of the Brain and Head* (Boston MA: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1835).
[26] Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago,* p. 69.

In opposition to this view, critics such as George Waddington have made the case that Conrad was encouraging us to question the motivations of Stein. Stein, Waddington suggests, is a cypher for the deleterious impact of Western commercial colonialism upon the Indonesian people and environment. His rapaciousness is concealed under an intellectual veneer, reflecting the misleading attribution of higher order values and objectives to the colonial project. The premise of Waddington's argument is that the reader should question the quality of Marlow's judgement of Stein, based on the superficiality of many of this narrator's judgements. He allies this argument with the novel's preoccupation with the divergence of surface appearances from the more complex realities that might lie below.[27] In support of his case, he cites Marlow's description of Stein:

> The gentle light of a simple, unwearied, as it were, intelligent good nature illumed his long hairless face. It had deep inward folds, and was pale as of a man who had always led a sedentary life – which was indeed far from being the case. His hair was thin, and brushed back from a massive and lofty forehead…It was a student's face; only the eyebrows nearly all white, thick and bushy, together with the resolute searching glance that came from under them, were not in accord with his, I may say, learned appearance. He was tall and loose-jointed; his slight stoop, together with an innocent smile, made him appear benevolently ready to lend you his ear (146).

Phrases such as "far from being the case" and "were not in accord" should certainly give us pause and make us question whether Stein is all that he appears to be. Likewise, the critical moment when he captures the Coleoptera butterfly reveals Stein in a far from flattering light. Before he

[27] George Waddington, 'That "Wonderful" Man, Mr. Stein'.

describes the discovery of this rare butterfly, he casually mentions being attacked by a group of Malays: “I see it all in a minute, and I think – This wants a little management” (151).

Stein’s use of the language of commerce is similar to that of Marlow when he admiringly refers to Jim’s “regulation” of so much of Patusan life. The word “management” in the context of the intrusion of the Malay group on Stein’s naturalist project is telling, for it is in fact a euphemism for the cold-blooded killing of three human beings. These fatalities appear to cause him little concern and, having checked to ensure that his victims were indeed dead, he returns unperturbed to his primary preoccupation, the netting of the Coleoptera.

Similarly, his undertaking to help Jim is predicated on commercial terms, as opposed to being solely rooted in any innate human desire to help the young man. We read of his motives:

> He had a notion of paying off (in kind, I suppose) the old debt he had never forgotten. Indeed he had been all his life especially friendly to anybody from the British Isles. His late benefactor, it is true, was a Scot-and Jim came a long way south of the Tweed; (166).

It also seems likely that Conrad shared many of the sentiments expressed by Marlow when he speaks of the lengths to which the British and the Dutch would go to in their pursuit of spices such as pepper:

> Where wouldn’t they go for pepper! For a bag of pepper they would cut each other’s throats without hesitation, and would forswear their souls, of which they were so careful otherwise: the bizarre obstinacy of that desire made them defy death in a thousand shapes – unknown seas, loathsome and strange diseases, wounds, captivity, hunger, pestilence and despair. (164)

Stein undoubtedly emerges as a complex and credibly flawed human character. However, we must be cautious of judging him by the values of today while ignoring the enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity elicited by the works of Darwin and Wallace at the time that Conrad was writing. The wistful, sentimental quality of the language used to describe Stein, the backstory of his late wife – a local princess – and his undoubted concern for Jewel's well-being after Jim's death all suggest that Conrad empathised with the character he had created. The fact that Stein was almost certainly modelled upon an explorer and writer Conrad admired and used as a source only adds weight to the case for a sympathetic reading. The fact that he has flaws should not surprise us, coming from the pen of a writer with a sceptical view of humankind. The reader is left to ponder whether Conrad was perhaps not also caught up in the Western enthusiasms of the times: while he undoubtedly had a rare sensitivity to the impact of colonialism on his chosen settings for his Asian novels, these settings were always used in the service of the portrayal of Western characters. These individuals may have been flawed, their interventions self-serving and often doomed to failure, but they were always foregrounded at the expense of an exploration of the profound effect that they and the colonial system had upon those amongst whom they stumbled, and often fell.

There is a further dimension to commercialism which was emerging at the turn of the century, the examination of which may help to explain Conrad's possible blind spot, namely that of scale. This was a subject with which *fin-de-siècle* writers and thinkers were beginning to engage as technology spawned a disorienting array of discontinuities. Paul Fyfe, in his journal article 'Scale' cites Henry James' novella *In the Cage* (1898) as an early example of the impact of technology.[28] In James' tale, the nameless female telegraphist grapples with the huge escalation in communication, much

[28] Paul Fyfe, 'Scale', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 46.3-4 (2018), 848-51.

of it cryptic and ambiguous, to discern what is actually happening in the real world, as she is trapped and isolated in the cage of her place of work, the post office.

Unpacking the notion of scale, we observe that a distinctive aspect of Conrad's writing is his ability to animate a drama set on a small stage, be this a settlement on an estuary (*An Outcast of the Islands* or *Almayer's Folly*), an island (*Victory* and *Lord Jim*), or a ship (*The Narcissus* and *Typhoon*), to explore much larger themes relating to the human condition. To use the language of modern business, this is impressive "scaling" of an intellectual notion. However, there is an aspect of scaling that is perhaps less well conveyed and that is the immense size and extent of the impact of Western commercial and colonial interventions on the people of Southeast Asia. It is as though Conrad was so preoccupied with the plight of his European subjects that he failed to appreciate what it felt like to be on the receiving end of either the British or Dutch colonial project. It may also have been the function of an inability of the creative imagination of the time to comprehend the nature of a discontinuity so profoundly different in scale from anything hitherto experienced. Ironically it was perhaps those who had been colonised who had a more acute appreciation of the impact of such scale.

Conrad was writing at a time when such technological revolutions were beginning to accelerate in frequency and to intensify in their potential consequences. These innovations included the mechanization of transport, the industrialisation of war and the electrification of communication. Wilkinson, in her case for a "New Economic Approach" to *Nostromo*, argues that:

> Conrad figures a new way of seeing an increasingly diffuse global economy. The novel's empty centre is a form of imagining the social and financial relations necessitated by autotelic capitalist expansion: it is deliberately and resolutely empty, and it creates a vision

> of a world where everything is a subject of capital, and where everything is subordinate to economic connection.[29]

Wilkinson also identifies a unity between literary form and moral intent, with the "empty centre" echoing the amorality which lay at the heart of the imperialist commercial project. However, I would argue that, while Conrad was unusually prescient in his appreciation of the intricate flows of capital resources and the dangers of the single-minded pursuit of material interests inherent in the emerging economic model of the day, he, like the vast majority of his contemporaries, was less well equipped to grasp the sheer magnitude of the transformations that were about to take place. Such scaling had never been seen before.

The colonial commercial model was predicated upon the notion of scale facilitated by technology, particularly technology related to transportation and firearms. By 1900 the Dutch had laid down 1,200 miles of railway track in Indonesia, primarily for the purpose of moving tradable commodities (coffee, tea, cacao and rubber) to Batavia and Surabaya for exportation. It must also be remembered, as Babalachi laments in *Almayer's Folly*, that it was firearms technology that enabled the Dutch to subjugate their colonial subjects.[30] They achieved this with a remarkably small number of colonial managers. The Dutch population of Indonesia, for instance, never exceeded 300,000 people, at a time when that country had a population of 34 million. Alec Gordon estimates that between 1878 and 1941 the Dutch extracted what he terms a "colonial surplus" of between $398 to $5,123 billion from Indonesia.[31] However, the sense that even these numbers fail to convey is what it felt like to be in the crosshairs of such a rapacious and asymmetric system.

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[29] Claire Wilkinson, 'The Empty Centre of Conrad's *Nostromo*: A New Economic Approach', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 47.3 (2018), 201-21.
[30] Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*, p. 155.
[31] Gordon, 'How Big was Indonesia's "Real" Colonial Surplus in 1878-1941?'.

Conrad's omission of this local perspective speaks to a seeming absence of appreciation for the impact of Western scaled commercialism upon the peoples of the Malay Archipelago. Wallace uses demography to support his glib contention (quoted at the start of this chapter) that the colonised people of Indonesia were content, citing the growth in the population as supporting evidence.[32] Therefore, it is perhaps appropriate to give another demographic statistic to contrast with this claim: in 1900 life expectancy in Indonesia was 30 years.

A commercial reading of *Lord Jim* reveals Conrad's uncanny vision and adroit understanding of the complexity of international trading networks and the fraught nature of the relationship that often existed between isolated Western governors/managers and their Asian colonial bailiwicks. His grasp of such developments was impressive, as it was born of his engagement *within* the network of trading links as a mere merchant seaman. However, rather than blinding him to the bigger picture, his perspective as a participant enabled him to see how the Dutch leveraged their colonial assets to facilitate the industrial take-off of their own nation. Their strategy involved the introduction of agricultural and industrial commodities, cultivated by the Javanese, collected by Chinese intermediaries, and sold on overseas markets by European merchants. As Maya Jasanoff articulates, Conrad's vision lies at the inception of what is today "a burgeoning field of global history, which traces the movement of power, people, capital and ideas across national and imperial borders."[33] Conrad's ability to envisage the implications of such networks, of which he was a part, was exceptional.

*Lord Jim* can be read as metonymic of the colonial order, which under the British model achieved the dual objectives of control and scale by leveraging pre-existing, indigenous systems of

[32] Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago.*
[33] Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch*, p. 362.

government, the Malay term for which is *kerajaan.* The literal translation of the word is 'the condition of having a rajah'. It was through the Malay Rajahs that the British administered much of peninsula Malaya, creating the illusion that it was these rulers, recognised and respected by the local people, who were in control of their own territories. This disguised the reality that it was the likes of the Brookes, and other enterprising White Rajas, who ruled in the style of regents. We note in *Lord Jim* that Doramin and Tunku Allang control their own compounds or kampungs, but that it is Jim who is the overall ruler of the whole of Patusan. The point is emphasised by Doramin having to humbly approach Jim to ask for a particularly important and sensitive favour, namely his "hope of yet seeing his son ruler of Patusan", a desire which has to be approved by Jim. As Marlow tells his listeners:

> "It was difficult, for there could be no question that Jim had the power: in his new sphere there did not seem to be anything that was not his to hold or to give." (156)

This being the case, even Dain Waris fate lay within Jim's sway, adding irony to his name 'Waris' denoting 'heir'.

In Conrad's texts it is typically the local indigenous actors or 'managers' who have the networks of authority, influence and respect, and who ultimately know best how to achieve the objectives that have been articulated by their foreign bosses, the colonial masters. However, such power structures and networks are often complex and require reciprocity between the nominal head of the organisation and his team. Hence, leaders such as Marlow or Jim can also paradoxically be cast in the role of captives, an insight about which Marlow repeatedly reminds his listeners. On one occasion he states that Jim was "imprisoned within the very freedom of his power" (205):

> Because all his conquests, the trust, the fame, the friendships, the love – all these things that made him master had made him a captive, too. He looked with an owner's eye at the peace of the evening, at the river, at the houses, at the everlasting life of the forests, at the life of the old mankind, at the secrets of the land, at the pride of his own heart: but it was they that possessed him and made him their own to the innermost thought, to the slightest stir of blood, to his last breath …
>
> In fact Jim the leader was a captive in every sense. The land, the people, the friendships, the love, were like jealous guardians of his body. Everyday added a link to the fetters of that strange freedom. (190)

These passages express both the emotional and the structural imbrication which often characterises the relationship between the expatriate and their local agents. In Conrad's texts, the expat often has both the deep human desire to be accepted within a foreign culture about which he or she understands little, and the practical need to build bonds that will facilitate the achievement of the business objectives, which have often been handed down by a distant Europe-based head office.

In the era of the Brookes' Raj in Sarawak (1841–1941), James, Charles and Vyner Brooke professed, and no doubt believed, that they had the best interests of the local population in mind as they "regulated" and "managed" the state. As such, they almost certainly held the view that their rule was welcomed by the majority of the indigenous people, in spite of evidence to the contrary provided by incidents such as the rebellion of Chinese immigrant workers in February 1857. This event is still termed "The Chinese Rebellion" (sometimes "Uprising"), suggesting that it was an assault on a legitimate government. The euphemistic language of colonialism further served to deceive both the coloniser and the colonised, the British being wont to speak of their overseas possessions as Protectorates, a paternalistic status applied to the relationship between the

United Kingdom and the North Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. Almayer, Jim and Heyst are each appointed as 'protectors' of Western-owned material interests. In the case of Almayer, those interests belong to Lingard, while Chester seeks to deploy Jim as the manager of his guano enterprise. In the case of Heyst, he is charged with the responsibility of managing the Western-owned "The Tropical Belt Coal Company". Ironically none of these men cover themselves in glory in their managerial roles. A similar model was still discernible in Western-owned multi-national companies in the late twentieth century as they sustained the tradition of appointing European CEOs to run their overseas operating companies, even as it became evident that there were highly capable local leaders who could assume such roles. The prevalence of Dutch expatriate managers in Indonesia and their British counterparts in Malaysia is surely no coincidence.

*Pace* nationality, the self-belief of the expat in their own irreplaceability is given voice by Jim when he says: "But only try to think what it would be if I went away, Jove! Can't you see it? Hell loose" (242). Even the population of Patusan have internalised belief in the benign influence of the Europeans, whose reign is credited with the protection of the poor (262). Likewise, Marlow appears to be at pains to explain – and to justify – how a flawed and conflicted character like Jim is in some sense entitled to his privileged leadership position. Jim's authority may have been based upon "bally rot", but this does not prevent him from demonstrating that he is responsible, trustworthy and meriting of his new-found status and leadership (193).

This position also affords him the opportunity to redeem himself, a fact that can never be vouchsafed to the people over whom he exercises power, and one which may indeed mark him out as being thoroughly unsuitable for such a responsible role. It certainly puts him under immense personal stress, as he exclaims: "I must feel – every day, every time I open my eyes – that I am trusted" (179). This goes to the very heart of Jim's conflicted character: he is genuine in his desire

to atone for his abandoning of the Muslim pilgrims aboard the ill-fated Patna, as well as to care, by his own lights, for the people who have come to trust and depend upon him. He fervently believes he is their *protector*. As such, he represents the paternalism of empire. At the same time, he is conscious that he (arguably like the colonial model itself) is an illusion, a sham:

> Is not strange…that all these people, all these people who would do anything for me, can never be made to understand? Never! ...If you ask them who is brave – who is true – who is just – who is it they would trust with their lives? – they would say, Tuan Jim. And yet they can never know the real truth, real truth…you just try to tell (that you wouldn't like to have me aboard your own ship) to any of them here. They would think you a fool, a liar, or worse. And so I can stand it. (222)

The illusion that Jim is able to sustain, until events elude his control in the denouement of the novel, is facilitated by the aura of moral superiority afforded to his race. Consider how Dain Waris is seen as vulnerable, unlike Jim, for "He had not Jim's racial prestige." (263)

The fragile and ambiguous position of the expatriate within the frantic and contested world of late nineteenth-century globalised commerce can be seen reflected in the title with which Jim is dubbed: *Tuan*. There is no direct equivalent in English, the translation of the term as "Lord" gives him an unduly elevated status above that implied by the word *Tuan.* It certainly does not carry the formal gravity and respect of *Tuanku* – literally "My Lord" or "King". There is perhaps an implied hollowness behind Conrad's choice of *Tuan* for his everyman Jim.

In this chapter I have argued that commerce, in its various manifestations, lies at the heart of *Lord Jim*. As I have demonstrated, these range from the interpersonal, as expressed in the person of the concubine, through to the institutional, as manifested by the colonial project and the character of

Stein. An awareness of the all-pervasive nature of commerce allows us to gain new purchase on the overarching preoccupations of the novel. Conrad's nuanced and ambiguous narrative invites use to interrogate the effects of the imbrication of commerce and colonialism and the resultant commodification of land, nature and people. However, the author may also have unintentionally revealed that he was not entirely immune to the excitement and potentialities of Western scientific innovations. Ultimately, we are left with the uncomfortable sense that his unrelenting quest for an understanding of the effects of an alien environment upon his Western protagonist is at the expense of a reciprocal examination of the consequences of the imperial commercial project upon those it exploited.

## Chapter Six: Commodities, Character and Contradictions: *Victory*

He had entered by then the broad, human path of inconsistencies.

Conrad, *Victory* (135)

As Conrad entered his later years, secure in the knowledge that he had become a recognized and respected writer, the recipient of the praises of contemporary novelists such as his friends Henry James and H. G. Wells, he was often to be found driving his latest motor car around the lanes of Kent, the county in which he had made his home at Pent Farm, near Hythe. Apparently, he drove at hair-raising speeds, sometimes as fast as 60 mph. This seems incongruous for an undemonstrative man of conservative tastes, with a love of the old ways and technologies long consigned to history.[1] He owned a string of cars, which included a Model T Ford, a Daimler, a Humber, a Studebaker and a Panhard: he evidently had a taste for things both American and technologically innovative. Ironically, in view of the Polish-born Conrad's tortured relationship with Russia, the primary source of the petrol which powered his cars was Russia. This was to change in 1917 with the advent of the Bolshevik revolution, when the AA (The Automobile Association) started promoting Benzol sourced from British-mined coal.

In Conrad's defence, he was not alone amongst the well-to-do set of the Edwardian era in having developed a passion for speed, powered by the internal combustion engine. However, for a man who had established himself as an ardent critic of the steam era, which had sounded the death knell for the sailing ships he loved, this should give us pause. For was this not also the author who in *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* had recoiled against the excesses of modern resource extraction and particularly lamented the Northern Hemisphere's increasing dependence upon coal?

[1] Tondre, 'Conrad's Carbon Imaginary', p. 57.

As a supposed critic of colonialism, had it escaped his notice that the Dunlop tyres which shod his various motor cars were manufactured from rubber sourced from British-ruled Malaya and Ceylon, where, by 1910, 300,000 hectares of land had been turned over to the planting of non-indigenous rubber trees? This is not a subject upon which he touched a single time in his extensive correspondence (the Cambridge University Press Edition runs to eight volumes). Such an omission is unusual in a man who expended considerable intellectual energy reflecting upon the interconnectivity of global networks. This seeming contradiction may provide a clue to his apparent blindness to the perspectives of those from other cultures and specifically the Asian characters and communities featured in his novels set in Southeast Asia. However, having confronted some of the complex questions that Conrad's texts raise about race and racism, and having acknowledged the contradictions these seemingly imply about the author's attitudes, we must surely look elsewhere for possible explanations for this apparent oversight or Euro-American bias. It is perhaps in the liminal age of carbon-powered technology in which he lived that the answer may be found.

The contention of this chapter will be that Conrad was primarily engaged with the multivarious consequences of globalised trade and dependence upon fossil fuels. And, while clearly not labouring under some of the more egregious and widely held prejudices of his day, particularly as depicted by Chinua Achebe, he was very much a man of his time. As such, he was inevitably influenced by and preoccupied with the economic and technological transformations which were becoming the obsession of the age. The period during which Conrad wrote his Asian novels, bookended by *Almayer's Folly* in 1895 and *Victory* in 1915, marked the apogee of Britain's reliance upon coal, with a peak of 292 million tonnes of locally mined coal being consumed in 1913. In the decades that followed, between 1920 to the start of the Second World War in 1939,

the dominance of coal in Northern Europe and North America was gradually supplanted by oil. From 1940 it would be this "liquid coal" that would become the world's new industrial "drug" of choice, the commodity pervading every aspect of the lives of those living in the West. As the economic historian Paul Stevens argues, no other commodity had (and indeed, continues to have) a greater impact on economic well-being (or malaise depending upon your viewpoint) than oil.[2]

It was in 1912 that Churchill, in his first major political role as First Sea Lord at the Admiralty, ordered the conversion of all British warships to oil power. This was a symbolic and visionary initiative, which enabled Britain to continue to rule the waves and ensured national security in the war which was to come only two years later. Oil not only enabled ships to achieve much higher speeds, it also made it possible to adjust those speeds more sensitively and effectively. Furthermore, it facilitated swifter refuelling. However, from the perspective of supply-chain security, it made the country strategically dependent upon imports of oil from the Middle East and the USA, the political ramifications of which have echoed down through subsequent decades. It is hard to overstate both the practical and cultural influence that oil has exercised over the psyche and imagination of those living in the Northern Hemisphere over the past hundred years.

A century later we are seeing a parallel turning of the wheel in the evolution of energy sourcing, as we enter the post-carbon era; oil is beginning to be replaced by other, hopefully, cleaner and more sustainable forms of power generation – a transition driven both by economic and environmental imperatives. This profound change encourages us once again to reconsider Conrad's novels and to ask what they tell us about the challenges we might face as one technology gives way to another. It is perhaps for this reason that there has been an increasing preoccupation

[2] Paul Stevens, 'The Geopolitical Implications of Future Oil Demand - Energy Transition in History, Research Paper' (Chatham House, 2019), Chapter Two.

amongst Conrad scholars with the author's focus on and treatment of commodities, raw materials and the extractive industries. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller's and Michael Tondre's work are but two examples of such critical works.[3] These shed a new light on Conrad's writing, with a particular concentration upon his prescience and continuing relevance to contemporary socio-economic issues. Tondre, along with Imre Szeman, Stephanie LeMenager and Jennifer Wenzel, draws our attention to how fossil fuels "saturate" both the cultures and aesthetics of particular periods, while Miller has formulated the concept of a transitive re-reading of Conrad's novel by viewing them through the lens of carbon-based industry, in particular the transition from coal into oil.[4] This reappraisal of Conrad embraces themes as diverse as globalisation, the images and language that it spawned, and mankind's relationship with nature, through to the very means by which Conrad committed his tales to paper, namely the medium of ink.

This chapter takes a slightly different slant to the critics mentioned above, and considers the relationship between the emerging industrial mindset of the early twentieth century and the effects this had on the differing attitudes of the rapidly industrialising European world towards Asia. The latter was primarily regarded as a source of raw materials, such as spices, palm oil, rubber and tin, to power and sustain the prosperity of the former. Conrad's fascination with the effects of industrialisation and its unquenchable, and often deleterious, thirst for the essential sources of energy led to an unintentional 'commodification' of his non-European characters, whereby they figuratively became elements of the landscape from which the West sought to extract fossil fuels and other valuable commodities. I argue that the industrial revolution and the industrialised

[3] Miller, 'Drill Baby Drill'; Tondre, 'Conrad's Carbon Imaginary'.
[4] Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and the Environment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Northern Hemisphere's addiction to fossil fuel led to the bifurcation of views about the relationship between mankind and the planet. In the Southern Hemisphere, particularly within rural communities, there continued to be a more symbiotic and respectful relationship between nature and the people who often depended upon its sustainable productivity for their livelihoods. Meanwhile, in the more industrialised North, the planet became a resource to be exploited, nature and society becoming binary opposites, with man struggling and toiling to extract the commodities that had become essential to wealth creation. Conrad was not unique in enjoying the benefits of this new era of progress while philosophically appraising its contradictions and blights. As previously noted in the examination of *Almayer's Folly*, it is salutary to reflect upon Conrad's portrayal of the natural world in the Asian novels, where the river and jungle settings often possess a dark aura of decay, threat and foreboding. This evokes a sense of moral decay, while also foregrounding the vulnerable position that man occupies on the planet. The glimpse of the truth that perhaps eluded Conrad was the broader implications of "commodification" upon those whose countries provided the raw materials so highly prized, but often cheaply procured, by the West.

Such materials lie at the heart of several of Conrad's novels. In *Almayer's Folly* we read of the gold that Lingard has supposedly found, the location of which he had noted in the pocket book he secreted in his neglected desk. Almayer believes this information will lead him and Daim to the source (66). It is this belief which keeps Almayer tethered to a place he detests, amongst people he has come to despise. In *Heart of Darkness*, it is the sourcing of ivory which has led to Kurtz's fateful posting to the upper reaches of the Congo River; in *Lord Jim* the eponymous hero is engaged in the harvesting of guano, while in *Nostromo* it is the mining of silver which is the *raison d'etre* for the town of Sulaco. In the same novel it is the folk tale of two *gringos* having gone in search of gold, never to be heard of again, which lives on as local myth. The two are:

> believed to be dwelling to this day amongst the rocks, under the fatal spell of their success. Their souls cannot tear themselves away from their bodies mounting guard over the discovered treasures.[5]

In the case of *Victory*, Heyst's failed entrepreneurial venture takes its name from the place and the commodity it sought to profitably extract – The Tropical Belt Coal Company. With the exception of guano, all of these commodities are ultimately non-renewable; however, the ruthless methods and inhuman conditions of the guano industries give it a chilling similarity with the mining of ore, particularly when viewed from the point of view of those employed at the "coal face". The nature of the materials and of the technologies and methods used for their mass extraction contribute to the sense of disquiet which pervades each of these works. They inform our understanding of the nature of the characters of the main protagonists and explain why they are bound to specific geographies. As Miller states:

> The temporal structures of provincial realist novels set in extractive landscapes convey a growing nineteenth-century sense of extraction-based life as untethered to the seasonal rhythms of the living earth and they convey a new conception of futurity imbued with the realization that Britain was now reliant on an industrial system powered by a non-renewable, diminishing stock of resources. Such novels are premised not on the human life cycle like *bildungsroman*, nor the seasons of the year, like the pastoral, they are instead premised on the notion of a depleted or undead future. This future is open in the sense that it will not grow from the past – it will have been drained by the past.[6]

[5] Conrad, *Nostromo*, p. 6.
[6] Miller, 'Drill Baby Drill', p. 30.

Macarena Gómez-Barris goes further, seeing extraction-based capitalism being at the heart of the doomsday "no future" paradigm. She contrasts this with the growing movement towards trans-generational stewardship. She argues that any critique of reproductive futures has to be balanced against the historical weight of anti-indigenous policies, which have sought to fix indigenous populations in the past and deny their claims to the future.[7] As Jason Moore argues, capitalism has long failed to acknowledge its dependence upon what he calls "cheap nature".[8] By melding nature and those who occupy that natural landscape, the risk of dehumanisation becomes ever present.

*Victory* places Heyst and Lena on the fulcrum of these opposing forces: Conrad deliberately has them set up home in the former cash office of the failed Tropical Belt Coal Company. Their choice of habitat hints ominously at a delusional utopian fantasy of liberation from the marketplace and evokes a notional world come into being after the dissolution of the modern capitalist system. However, Conradian irony undercuts this illusion from the very outset, as Lena and Heyst's life on the island appears at once both barren and fulfilling. The Tropical Belt Coal Company's partially-built railway, rusting infrastructure and decommissioned engines are described as gradually being reclaimed by the jungle, while Heyst is portrayed as a dislocated Adam-like figure, musing to Lena "there must be a lot of the original Adam in me after all" (133). It is as if they had returned to a paradisical life amongst the ruins. The narrator tells us sardonically that "Tropical nature had been kind to the failure of the commercial enterprise." (133)

Irony is also used in the exploration of notions of value, with the author reflecting at some length about the allotropic relationship between coal and diamonds, the former being dubbed "black diamonds". Coal is tellingly described as "the supreme commodity of the age" (7). Conrad is alive

[7] Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extraction Zone* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 4.
[8] Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in The Web of Life: Ecology and The Accumulation of Capital*, pp. 21-3.

to the fact that this was the dawn of an age when values were becoming destabilised and redefined. A commodity which had once been valued by its aesthetic worth is now being "weighed" by a utilitarian measure. This transition is subtly articulated as "Black Diamond Bay" becomes known as "Diamond Bay", coal's value being elevated into that of a precious stone, a metaphor replacing a simile (27, 163). By introducing the notion of the disconnect between things and value Conrad is able to introduce the idea of the illusionary nature of "hard fact, facts alone", something in which Heyst, (like many engaged in commerce today) self-deceptively declares as the only currency in which he deals (10).

The Western lexicon of accounting, science and technology inveigles its way into the novel and provides Conrad with the opportunity to exercise his dry wit as he writes:

> There is, as every schoolboy knows in the scientific age, a very close chemical relationship between coal and diamonds. It is the reason why some people call coal "black diamonds". Both these commodities represent wealth: but coal is a much less portable form of property. There is from that point of view a deplorable lack of concentration in coal. Now if a coalmine could be put in one's waistcoat pocket – but it can't. At the same time there is a fascination in coal, the supreme commodity of the age in which we are camped…and those considerations prevented Heyst from going away. (7)

The passage is revealing from a number of perspectives. First, its language is evocative of any number of English books used across generations of the British preparatory schools from which the future managing classes were to be drawn. Secondly, the lesson in elementary science could have been derived from a forerunner to a Nuffield Science primer. Thirdly, there is the sense of forward propulsion and impermanence conveyed by the phrase "the supreme commodity of the age in which we are camped". Clearly, Conrad does not expect his generation to be stopping in

this temporal location for long, and they will soon be decamping, caught up in an inexorable drive forward, powered by the genius of Western scientific innovation and the rush towards oil.

Conrad also channels the terminology of accountancy, allowing himself to indulge in some light-hearted wordplay, as he writes:

> The Tropical Belt Coal Company went into liquidation. The world of finance is a mysterious world in which, incredible as the fact may appear, evaporation precedes liquidation. First the capital evaporates, and then the company goes into liquidation. These are very unnatural physics, but they account for the persistent inertia of Heyst. (7)

Conradian irony is to the fore, leavened perhaps by a touch of cynicism born of his often being cash-strapped, evidence of which is provided by his frequent references to his penurious state in his letters to his agent Eric Pinker.[9] The passage leaves the reader in little doubt as to author's scepticism concerning certain capitalist business practices, at least when it came to his own debtors. The terminology used reveals his perspective to be unquestionably Western.

As the Tropical Belt Coal Company fails, and Heyst and Lena attempt to build a romantic idyll amidst the ruins of the venture, the indigenous people of whom we are afforded fleeting glimpses, and who presumably once depended upon employment at the mine to fill their rice bowls, are paid scant attention. Likewise, the ghost-like Wang, evocative of immigrant Chinese labour and stereotypically characterised as untrustworthy (having stollen Heyst's knife), remain on the periphery of the action. Such incidental characters melt into the ominous jungle landscape beneath which reserves of coal remain to be exploited by future Europeans who will surely follow Heyst.

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[9] Conrad, *Collected Letters*, *Vol. 8*, Letter to Edward Garnett of 2 June 1923, p. 109.

What these local and indigenous peoples thought about the arrival of Heyst and his industrial assault on their bucolic island landscape appears not to be Conrad's concern. Indeed, we learn nothing about how the Malay kampong dwellers and aboriginals of the jungle were living prior to Heyst's arrival. We can only speculate about the concerns of these *Bumiputras*.

Indeed, it is in the field of human relationships that the principles and language of commerce are perhaps the most pervasive and corrosive. A Freudian perspective on the novel might identify Heyst's spoken words about his father as the most revealing:

> I suppose he began like other people; took fine words for good, ringing coin and noble ideals for valuable banknotes. He was a great master of both, himself, by the way. Later he discovered – how am I to explain it to you? Suppose the world were a factory and all mankind workmen in it. Well, he discovered that the wages were not good enough. That they were paid in counterfeit money. (150)

We also learn that, having lost his mother, his father became an even more domineering figure: we hear from Heyst's own mouth that "he dominated me without difficulty". (150) It is perhaps no surprise that he chooses to leave Sweden, but there is heavy irony in the fact that he seeks refuge in a part of the word where Anglo-Dutch colonialism ensures that the principles of commerce continue to inform the governance of inter-human commerce.

Although Lena is a musician, her relationship with Zangiacomo is defined in purely commercial terms. When Madame Zangiacomo pinches her, the fateful moment at which Heyst makes his decision to rescue her, it is for not engaging with the audience quickly enough. The purpose of that engagement has nothing to do with her role as a musician and everything to do with being an objectified, commodified woman, valued solely for her sexual attractiveness. When Lena escapes

with Heyst, both Schomberg and Zangiacomo pursue her as if she were a slave, a stolen possession for which they seek compensation. We even hear the language of commodification from Heyst's reference to his future partner, declaring that he "can always steal her" if he cannot "buy her out" (64).

The events which no doubt provided Conrad with the background material for his novel are readily discernible. They are drawn from records of 'The last Raja of Sarawak', Sir James Brooke's opening up of Borneo as the staging post for the British to trade in coal sourced from the region. This, along with the 1907 failure of Shell's Borneo adventure, was to lead to a fire sale merger with Royal Dutch to form the antecedents of the multinational company Royal Dutch Shell. He would also have been aware of the on-going debates about the threat posed by foreign "liquid coal" (oil) to British-mined coal. Liquidation also takes on a secondary meaning as Conrad uses it to animate descriptions of Heyst's character. As Tondre points out, "as the manager and former representative (of the Tropical Belt Coal Company) he (Heyst) embodies a protean impulse towards 'drifting' and 'floating' and 'swimming' both before and after its meltdown".[10]

We see in the conclusion of *Victory* what Herbert Marcuse describes as "the impenetrable resistance of matter". He uses the phrase to articulate the idea that the natural world is supremely indifferent to the capitalist drive and need for continuous growth. As he presciently wrote:

> Ecological catastrophes could lay bare the artificial logic of capitalism and in so doing stimulate awareness of other possible modes of existence.[11]

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[10] Tondre, 'Conrad's Carbon Imaginary', p. 74.
[11] Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972).

This encourages us to ask what might be the source of such alternatives and indeed what socio-economic models existed before the arrival of colonial capitalist adventurers like Heyst and his late partner Morrison. In spite of his jaundiced and pessimistic view of the nature of the colonial model, Conrad paid scant attention to potential alternatives. He was, after all, politically conservative by temperament and subscribed to the prevailing market economy of the day. His detachment is further evidenced by there being no record that he ever cast a vote in the UK after having become a British citizen. He also had a strong aversion to Socialism but, unlike his father, he never became engaged with the political struggles of his native Poland, preferring to leave the country of his birth. It is likely that, if pressed, the deracinated Conrad would have seen the West's need for fossil fuels as inescapable, and their sourcing from the colonies as the least bad option: a necessary evil and one which at least had the benefit of enabling him to fill the tank of his new Panhard.

The issues emerging from this alternative reading of *Victory* remain of relevance in today's world of multinational business, where it is still commonplace to find Westerners at the helm of substantial overseas operating companies. As recorded in the introduction to this thesis, I have pursued just such a career, ironically, a choice partly prompted by an early reading of *Victory*. The continuation of a policy seemingly predicated upon colonialist principles is not only a source of personal discomfort to me but also raises other important concerns, not least about the motivation for maintaining such a seemingly archaic practice in an age where the availability of management talent across nations is undeniable. Other concerns include the ability of a foreigner to ever truly understanding the habits, attitudes, motivations and aspirations of people from profoundly different cultures to his or her own. It is perhaps no coincidence that, in the realm of Marketing, those whom the company professes to be serving are often reduced to the single, impersonal,

utilitarian descriptor “the consumer” This seems a perilously close parallel to the commodification of local peoples suggested earlier in this thesis.

In the same way as the raw materials mined, albeit unsuccessfully, by the company Heyst managed were ultimately bound for the factories of Europe, transported in ships captained by men like Conrad, the profits generated by the overseas operating companies of multinational companies are still repatriated to their European- and American-based headquarters. While in today’s more institutionalised and regulated world, these profits are at least subject to a degree of local corporation tax, there is, however, no escaping the fact that legions of international lawyers and tax experts are deployed to ensure that not a penny more is paid locally than is absolutely necessary. Royalty agreements, whereby operating companies can pay up to 5% of their turnover to the corporate centre, ostensibly for the use of registered trademarks marketed around the world, is a further means of extracting value and ensuring that the local tax burden is optimised while returns to the shareholder are maximized. The margins of many European based multinationals are often higher in the developing and emerging world than in their home countries.

Ironically, we now live in an age when former “great” colonial powers find themselves in ambivalent relationships with American-owned social media giants who stand accused of paying desultory levels of taxes in the countries in which their profits are generated. Meanwhile, oil giants such as Royal Dutch Shell can avoid paying windfall taxes in the UK as long as they can demonstrate that capital has been invested in the country. Furthermore, unlike the “less portable” coal mined by The Tropical Coal Company, the profits generated in the virtual world by the likes of Meta Platforms Inc. are eminently transferable. The critical point in the context of the present analysis is that, by its very nature, the ascendent business model of any generation has a strong tendency to commodify and exploit those upon whom it depends for its profits. Such a mindset

also tends to inform the culture wherein ownership lies and dividends are paid. Hence, perhaps we should not be too surprised to find Conrad, later in life, driving his Panhard through the bucolic lanes of his adopted Kentish home, and, when not behind the wheel of his motorcar, seated at his writing desk focused upon the plight of his European protagonists while their Malay and Chinese hosts evaporate into the landscape.

However, such an observation about Conrad's Western materialist tendencies is not to detract from the larger canvas which he presents to us. In drawing together these three chapters on his major Asian texts, we should step back to reflect upon the journey that the novels track. In particular, I would draw attention to the relationship between the lead characters and the material commodities which temporally locate each of the works. For, while in terms of the study of character Conrad was primarily concerned with the moral conflicts and dilemmas with which men like himself were engaged, he was, as I have demonstrated, an author who organised his novels around commercial material resources: in *Almayer's Folly* gold, in *Lord Jim* guano and in *Victory* coal, not forgetting ivory in *Heart of Darkness* and silver in *Nostromo*. From these commodities Conrad discerned and scoped the networks that embrace all aspects of inter-related global trade and commerce: shipping, manufacturing, packaging, accounting, advertising and banking. Such commodity-based networks continue to be built today by China, particularly in Africa, as the former seeks to secure the essential sources of energy and raw materials which it requires to maintain economic growth – growth it believes will fuel prosperity and ensure fidelity or acquiescence to the ruling Communist Party. Meanwhile, Western companies go in search of populous, fast-growing overseas markets to rekindle flagging topline growth and to ensure they continue to meet shareholder expectations of both capital and dividend growth.

For an author who is often seen as the father of Modernism, the important part played by material objects and commodities, more commonly associated with nineteenth-century realism, raises interesting questions. As Simon James suggests:

> Realism's detractors fear that freighting the text with objects retards narrative: narrative must be mobile in order to function. Since objects can express social meaning and possessions are alienable – can pass from hand to hand – the nature of the meanings invested in these objects can therefore change. The object of the realist text is not merely pictorial, but can be narrativized through its movement in space and time.[12]

Building upon this notion of the meaning inherent in the relationship between the material and the human, I would suggest that the evolving relationship between the central characters of the three novels and the material commodities with which they are engaged gestures towards Conrad's own changing concerns about man's ever-increasing dependency on, and intimacy with, the commodities upon which modern life depended.

In *Almayer's Folly* the eponymous lead character is in futile search of gold, a fungible form of value which he dreams of selling to traders in Amsterdam. In *Lord Jim*, the objective of the guano operation to which Jim is assigned is the provision of nitrogen, phosphate and potassium to fertilise the new agriculture model that Stein seeks to practice in Indonesia. These farms would produce agricultural commodities such as coffee, which would come to be traded on global markets. By the time he came to write *Victory*, the commodity of coal (shortly thereafter to be replaced by oil) was not merely tradable but had become an essential element of modern Western life. In that new

[12] Simon J. James, 'Material Matters, The Surface of Realist Fiction in Landscapes of Realism' in *Landscapes of Realism: Rethinking Literary Realism in Comparative Perspectives, Vol. 2: Pathways Through Realism,* ed. by Svend Erik Larsen, Steen Billie Jorgensen and Margaret R. Higonnet (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2022), 233-69 (p. 244).

West, coal, unlike gold and guano, had insinuated itself into all aspects of daily human existence. While it was being consumed, coal had in a sense become all-consuming of modernity. In the course of twenty years Conrad had crafted novels which reflected upon the implications of humanity's "progress" from the times of barter, through the agrarian revolution to the era of industrial transformation.

In the character of Heyst, Conrad created a stunted everyman who attempts to escape to some kind of post-industrial Eden away from the implications of the source of energy with which he had become professionally engaged. In both his coal mining venture and his subsequent attempt to disengage, he fails. In the closing passages of the novel the narrative voice changes, stepping back from the action and observing from an objective distance. The voice is that of a passing shipman. Significantly, for the present-day reader, the narrator is operating a Chinese-owned steamer. He reports Heyt's suicide thus:

> I didn't want to intrude on his grief. Later about five in the morning, some of my calashes came running to me, yelling that there was a fire ashore. I landed at once of course. The principal bungalow was blazing. The heat drove us back. The other two houses caught one after another like kindling-wood. (308)

Heyst had ultimately become just so much fuel.

## Chapter Seven: Commerce, Concubinage and Colonialism: Pramoedya and Conrad

Teeming with Life and Commerce.

Conrad, *Almayer's Folly* (1895). [1]

> The country without a colony was like a widower who had to do all the housework as well as make a living by himself. The colony was like the wife who went out to work, who was faithful and obedient. Even though it was contrary to Christian morality (except Mormons of course), the more wives a colonial power had, the more prosperous he would be, and the more desirable.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer *House of Glass,* Vol. 1, *The Buru Quartet* (1988).[2]

This chapter begins with a brief biographical introduction of the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer. An understanding of his role as a leading figure of Indonesian Modernism alongside his political significance in post-independence Indonesia is essential to the case argued in this thesis. Although divided by half a century, a period which straddled the colonial and post-colonial ages, Conrad and Pramoedya shared much in common politically, both having experienced first-hand the pain and privation of living under a domineering occupying power, Conrad's father arguably losing his life as a direct result of his struggles against Russian imperialism. Yet the responses of the two authors are profoundly different: Conrad's detached, sceptical and pessimistic; Pramoedya's engaged, realistic and ultimately optimistic.

I foreground here two topics that unite the authors: the roles of commerce and the role of women, in particular of the *nyai* or concubine in Asian colonial society. I also explore how the two authors'

[1] Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*, p. 7.
[2] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *House of Glass*, p. 65.

treatments of these important inter-related themes diverge. In so doing, I demonstrate how a reading of Conrad's Asian novels refracted through the prism of Pramoedya's tetralogy not only reveals certain blind-spots in Conrad's perspectives, but also positions both authors on a Modernist pathway. Read in conjunction, the novelists provide an enriched and inclusive historical portrayal of the colonial experience and its aftermath.

By a coincidence of literary chance, a year after Conrad died of a heart attack at his Bishopbourne home in 1924, aged sixty-six, Pramoedya was born on the island of Java. "The Indies", as the country was then known, was still under Dutch rule, a period of colonialism which had commenced in 1816 and did not end until the Japanese invasion of 1941. He was to become a thorn in the side of successive administrations, both in colonial times and during the post-colonial dictatorships of Presidents Sukarno and Suharto.

From 1947 to 1949 Pramoedya was held as a political prisoner of the Dutch as a result of his role in the post-World War Two independence struggle, as the Dutch sought to re-establish control over their former colony. They were aided in this endeavour by British troops during the Battle of Surabaya. From the late 1950s, Pramoedya began teaching literature at the left-wing Universitas Res Publica in Jakarta. It was during this time that he formulated his ideas concerning the manner in which the Dutch had undermined and distorted both the study of Indonesian history and the teaching of Bahasa Indonesian ("Bahasa" meaning "language" in Malay).

His left-leaning politics led him to spend time in Communist China. During this period, he developed a deep sympathy for the Chinese diaspora who had settled in Indonesia and had become a powerful force in the business community of the country. He published *Hoakiau di Indonesia* ("A History of the Overseas Chinese in Indonesia") in 1960. He also criticized the Sukarno government for being too focused upon the most populous island of Java, at the expense of

addressing the needs of Indonesia's other diverse and disparate island populations. For his activism he was jailed for nine months in Cipinang Prison.

Following the fall of Sukarno in 1965, there was a period during which what has only recently been recognised as genocide was committed against the Chinese Indonesian community. It is not known precisely how many people died as a result of this communal violence; however, estimates range from 300,000 to 500,000. Ironically, much of this slaughter was incited by the specious portrayal of ethnic Chinese-Indonesians as third-column Communist sympathizers and instruments of the Communist party of mainland China – a political doctrine and country from which many had, in fact, fled. The assassination of several senior Indonesian generals was also laid at the door of the Indonesian Communist party (the PKI). Pramoedya's leadership of the People's Cultural Organisation, a group with strong ties to the PKI, resulted in him being labelled a subversive; he was arrested, beaten and imprisoned as a *tapol* (a political prisoner). He was incarcerated without trial on the island of Buru.

Denied access to pen and paper, it was during this time that he narrated to his fellow inmates the tales that were to form the basis of his four most famous works: *This Earth of Mankind, Child of all Nations, Footsteps* and *House of Glass,* which comprise *The Buru Quartet*. He was imprisoned from 1969 to 1979. Even after his release, he was held under house arrest until 1992. During this period his books remained banned. It was not until the 1998 fall of the "Smiling General", President Suharto, amidst widespread rioting prompted by the near-collapse of the Indonesian economy, that he was truly free.

The action of the *Buru Quartet* unfolds in the early years of the twentieth century, the period during which most of Conrad's Asian novels are also set. It charts the journey of Minke, a character who Pramoedya based on the Indonesian journalist and activist Tirto Adhi Soeji. The first three novels,

narrated by Minke, see him develop from a naïve, headstrong and conflicted young man into a newspaper-owning propogandist, strategist and leader, before he is arrested, exiled and imprisoned. *The Buru Quartet* features a diverse range of characters drawn from different races and ethnicities; Chinese Indonesians play a prominent role, as do several strong female characters. The final novel, *House of Glass,* sees the narration shift to the voice of Pangemanann, a French-educated Indonesian who has cast in his lot with the colonial regime and is employed as a spy and *agent provocateur* to undermine his own people. The change of perspective demands that the reader question the corrosive influence of colonialism from both sides of the power divide. As a creative expression of the ideas first expressed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), there can be few works to match Pramoedya's *House of Glass*.[3]

There are also strong echoes of Conrad's novels in the locations chosen by Pramoedya for his own dramatization of the Dutch colonial era. Unsurprisingly, for a man who made his living aboard merchant ships, many of Conrad's Asian novels take as their settings ports and estuaries around which trade and commerce was conducted. As we have seen, trade and its concentration around such locales was one of the means by which Conrad's Western characters became rooted. Of these ports, the largest was the trading city of Surabaya in eastern Java. The commercial preoccupations of the city led Howard W. Dick to title his study of the city *Surabaya, City of Work*. [4] From its origins as the gateway city and port for the Majapahit Kingdom, it has continued to be a thriving centre of industry. The city's founding fathers clearly had a sense of both foresight *and* humour, for the name they chose is a combination of the Javanese words for shark and crocodile. This is also the port city selected by Pramoedya for the setting of *This Earth of Mankind*, the first volume

[3] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*.
[4] Howard W. Dick, *Surabaya, City of Work: A Socioeconomic History*, *1900-2000* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2000).

of *The Buru Quartet*. Carried on the ships that used this port were the products of the Spice Islands. These were the commodities that first caught the attention of European colonizing powers, in particular the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the Netherlands. Also off-loading onto the Surabaya wharfs were machines brought to Asia from the factories of Europe, foremost amongst these being mining equipment of the kind to be employed by The Tropical Belt Coal Company managed by Conrad's Heyst in *Victory*. Such equipment was also likely used to fell the logs which mesmerize Almayer as he watches them being swept down the Sambir river. Alongside these mechanical products were more natural commodities, such as raw rubber, coffee beans, sugar palm oil and various minerals. These were bound in another direction, to the ports of London, Liverpool, Manchester and Rotterdam. Other vessels sailed southwards carrying raw materials to Australia. On the return leg they would bring the cows upon which Java's dairy industry was founded.

These ships, captained by men like Conrad, brought with them Dutch officials, businessmen and adventurers. Several European-based multinational companies owe their present-day market strength in Southeast Asia, at least in part, to the establishment of local subsidiaries during the first decade of the twentieth century. This was long before their American competitors identified the potential of the region and before local entrepreneurs had amassed the financial and technical capital resources essential to the building of such operations.

Other nationalities and races also arrived by sea: Arabs, Indians and Chinese. Each group brought with them aspects of the life of their own countries and cultures which were to form integral parts of the country we know today as Indonesia. This *mélange* of peoples created no small challenge for the Dutch colonial masters of the East Indies. That government ruled over a colony which made

one of the smallest countries in Europe one of the richest. This is an example of the scaling and leverage which has been explored in my analysis of *Lord Jim* in chapter five.

As Pramoedya demonstrates in *The Buru Quartet*, the colonial model was predicated upon the acceptance of subservience by the native people who toiled in the service of the Netherlands. It also required a culture of silence on the part of the colonized – silence both of the voice and of the word on the printed page: hence the significance of the author's decision to make his hero Minke a fledgling newspaper editor and publisher. There is also deep irony in Pramoedya's decision to make Minke a journalist, for the author was denied the use of pen and paper during his imprisonment under the Sukarno regime. In turn, this colonial system gave rise amongst the colonisers to feelings of cultural arrogance and superiority. These were attitudes that were inherited and echoed by the ruling elites of subsequent dictatorships.

In Conrad, and to an even greater extent in Pramoedya, we hear the voices of both the colonisers and the colonised. In Pramoedya's work, the voices of the latter are heard in all the complexity and contradiction born of a system which contained the seeds of its own downfall, and which ultimately led to the establishment of an independent Indonesia in 1945 (although the struggle continued until 1949). The common ground on which these two profoundly different authors stand, separated by time, culture and nationality, is to be found in the marketplace of trade and commerce. It is also trade and commerce which links the colonial times, about which both authors wrote, to the world of today – a world in which, arguably, multinational companies have succeeded former colonial powers.

Conrad's and Pramoedya's shared interest in the business of trade and commerce further validates the use of these fundamental human practices as lenses through which to explore Conrad's Asian novels, with Pramoedya's *Buru Quarter* holding up a mirror to Conrad's work. In so doing, we

are afforded the benefit, not granted to Conrad, of a dual perspective on a world and a specific time. To use a monetary analogy, the two authors might now be viewed as two opposite but complementary sides of the same coin. An understanding of Pramoedya's perspectives sheds new and revealing light upon Conrad's preoccupations and possible omissions. As I have argued earlier in this thesis, there is little question regarding Conrad's moral and intellectual position on the vexed subject of colonialism. As John A. McClure writes in *Kipling and Conrad* "the Lingard novels demolish several of the flattering myths of imperial domination", while *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) demolishes "the image of the benign imperial father".[5] Conrad is alive to the fundamental truth that the primary objective of the colonial project was the extraction of value. This was an objective that was achieved either through the mining of raw materials using cheap local labour, or the distortion of indigenous agricultural systems to grow globally-traded commodities such as coffee, or through the commercialisation of the newly-discovered botanical riches of the Malay Archipelago.

Another charge that cannot be levelled at Conrad's door is that he was solely concerned with the inner life of his characters at the expense of the rich array of influences associated with the environment in which they have their being. To quote Jacques Berthoud, "the individual subject" is:

> at once the centre of its own perceptions and the product of group formations, whether social, sexual, racial, religious or national. This means that no human life, however private,

[5] John A. McClure, *Kipling and Conrad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 120.

> can be understood merely internally but has also to be construed in terms of its location in the external world.[6]

Furthermore, through their participation in trade, Conrad's characters are of necessity forced to engage with others, this being the very essence of commercial activity. An activity which has as its prime objective the creation of value or wealth is the ideal catalyst for the greed and envy of his protagonists and compelling dramatic material for a novelist.

Having cleared Conrad of charges of being blind to the failings of the colonial model and of being solely preoccupied with the inner life of his main characters, we must, however, remind ourselves that in all three of the major novels examined in this thesis, Conrad's primary preoccupation is with his Western protagonists rather than those whose lives were most impacted and damaged by the forces of colonialism. Only in the character of Nina are there indications that Conrad was, at least initially, attracted to the examination of the dilemma of the Eurasian offspring of European-Malay marriages. However, *Almayer's Folly* proves to be a surprising outlier in Conrad's Asian series of novels, with Nina remaining the most fully realised of his female characters, when compared, for example, with Jewel in *Lord Jim*. As I have demonstrated in the chapter dealing with *Lord Jim*, it was in the realm of the family where the principles of commercial contract were most keenly and painfully felt, particularly by the local women who became the concubines of the colonial settlers.

This malign convergence of commercial colonialism with the politics of gender is at the heart of *This Earth of Mankind*. In this work, the central character and narrator Minke's first wife is forcibly repatriated to the Netherlands, while her mother, Nyai Ontosoroh, has the successful trading

[6] Jacques Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase*.

business she has built appropriated by Robert Mellema, the Caucasian son of her drunken (and later deceased) husband Mr Herman Mellema. Robert, we learn, is the product of an earlier, undisclosed marriage to a European woman, a marriage which appears never to have been dissolved. Conrad's seeming reticence to engage more fully with the human implications that the colonial system had for his female characters might merely be an indication that he was not immune to the prejudices of his time. However, his reluctance to delve more deeply into this space should lead us to question his deeper appreciation of the human consequences of the colonial system. It might also imply a momentary lapse of dramatic judgement, for the poignancy which springs from the impossible positions in which many Indonesian women found themselves is a critical component of what makes Pramoedya's *This Earth of Mankind* such a moving work.

Drawing on these insights, Christopher GoGwilt argues that it is through the role of the *nyai* or concubine that we discern the link in the chain of Modernism that runs from Conrad through to Pramoedya, novelists writing from different sides of the world and at opposite ends of the twentieth century.[7] It is also at the core of my own argument that Pramoedya provides the missing Asian perspective that we search for, but fail to satisfactorily locate, in Conrad's work. While we do find important female characters in conflicted positions in all three of the Conrad novels under examination, their portrayals are too often rendered in two dimensions or presented in passive sentimentalised terms in the service of Conrad's primary aims, namely, the exploration of the travails of his Western male characters as they are exposed to the experience of European colonialism. Most importantly, we are never allowed the opportunity to enter the Asian psyche in the way we are with Almayer, Jim and Heyst. It was not until half a century later, with the

[7] GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya*, p. 177.

publication of the *Buru* tetralogy, that the Western reader was afforded the chance to see Conrad's world anew, as it must have appeared to the Asian women whose social and legal position had been commodified by colonialism.

Pramoedya's *Buru* tetralogy provides an essential counterpoint to Conrad's Asian novels in this important respect. His work engages with similar themes but from a diametrically opposite viewpoint to Conrad, presenting us with a world in which the role of women is given primacy, in which commerce and trade are seen as potential instruments of national liberation, and in which the narrative of the region is ultimately returned to those to whom it rightfully belongs.

In 1995 Christopher GoGwilt interviewed Pramoedya following the latter's release from house arrest. GoGwilt asked the author for the reason he chose to foreground the role of Nyai Ontosoroh's lived experience in *This Earth of Mankind.* His answer was revealing:

> As a woman who stood up alone to the injustices of Dutch colonialism, she was a character who provided a model of resistance and courage for my fellow prisoners to look up to, so that their spirit would not be demoralized by the killings and the cruelties witnessed in the camps.[8]

Pramoedya rescues the diverse genre of the *nyai* narrative, which would have been readily recognized by readers in the early decade of the twentieth century, and uses it to create the vital figure of Nyai Ontosoroh, whose presence is felt throughout *The Buru Quartet*. Despite the central character Minke's narrative being privileged in the second and third volumes of the tetralogy, *Child of all Nations* and *Footsteps,* the reader is never allowed to lose touch with the influence that Nyai Onosoroh exercises throughout the collection. Through her character and her presence,

[8] Christopher GoGwilt, 'Pramoedya's Fiction and History: An Interview with Indonesian Novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 9.1 (1996), 147-64.

Pramoedya both articulates revolutionary anti-colonialism and gives testimony to post-colonial state oppression.

The choice of the *nyai* as a pivotal character was an adroit decision by Pramoedya, providing a single strong but vulnerable figure to express how colonial rule impacted, manipulated and traded an individual, their person and their life. He also demonstrates the essential relationship between commerce and gender which underpinned the colonial project. However, rather than portray business as the means by which the colonial masters oppress the native population, he deliberately casts Nyai Ontosoroh in the role of a successful businesswoman. It is she, not her dissolute Dutch husband, who has been responsible for building the extensive trading operation over which she presides after Mr. Mellema has been found dead in the neighbourhood brothel (a deliberate symbol of the commercialisation of human beings). It is significant that at no point is Nyai Ontosoroh described as either Mrs. or Ibu Mellema, the latter honorific being the corresponding Bahasa Indonesia title.

GoGwilt identifies the centrality of the role of the *nyai* to an understanding of the nature of Dutch colonialism and the struggle for independence. He argues that the use of Indonesian women by the Dutch colonial masters, both to run their houses and to satisfy their sexual desires, was emblematic of the nature of the relationship between the Netherlands and "Dutch East Indies". He underscores the significance of Pramoedya's decision to bind the four novels of the *Buru* tetralogy together through the character Nyai Ontosoroh, writing: "It is difficult not to read her character as a utopian prefiguration of the ideals of Indonesian nationalism". [9]

[9] GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature*, p.154.

GoGwilt goes on to explain the evolving status of the *nyai* after the abolition of slavery in 1860.[10] In doing so, he cites Jean Gelman Taylor's study of Dutch East Indies colonial society:

> In the VOC centuries (during the rule of the Dutch East Indies Company), men had made free with the Asian slave women of their households. After 1860, however, there was no more domestic slavery. Men living in concubinage now sought their companions among the free population of the Indonesian villages. The woman selected assumed management of the European household and staff, a position that gave rise to the common colonial euphemism for concubine, "housekeeper". It became customary for the concubine to exchange her coloured or indigo kebaya for a white one and to adopt slippers, the clothing symbolizing her new status and passage from the Indonesian to the halfway world of a bachelor-centred Indies society.[11]

GoGwilt concludes that in making such a transition the woman entered a world in which the title of *nyai* could imply a multiplicity of meanings, from "concubine", to "housekeeper" to "mistress". Francis explains this from the perspective of the Dutch lexicon:

> *Bijzit* means concubine, but *huishoudster* and *menagère* means, somewhat euphemistically, housekeeper and "housewife", not conveying the sense of nyai in its original languages as a specifically young and, by implication, unattached female.[12]

As GoGwilt explains, "The Javanese form of respectful address changes considerably in translation into the euphemistic, pejorative and disrespectful colonial 'judgement' of the term

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[10] GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature*, p. 155.
[11] Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p. 147.
[12] Francis, 'Marriage and Concubinage', p. 48.

*nyai*".[13] As we have already seen in the context of *Lord Jim*, it also carried a potentially life-changing legal implication, particularly when it came to the custodianship or "ownership" of children. It is this theme which forms a central thrust of the *Buru* narrative.

To briefly reprise the narrative arc of the tetralogy, it charts the journey of Minke, the first three novels being told from his perspective. It emerges that he has recorded the details of his story in the form of personal journals (effectively the first three novels). Through these, we see him develop from a wilful adolescent into a newspaper-owning propogandist and leader, before he is arrested, exiled and imprisoned. As previously noted, the final novel, *House of Glass* sees the narration shift to the character of Pangemanann, a French-educated Indonesian in the employ of the Dutch colonial regime. However, he is no shallow turncoat, but rather a deeply conflicted character who is in thrall to Minke, whose journals have fallen into his hands to be used as evidence against him. The change of perspective skilfully demands that the reader interrogate both the corrosive impact of colonialism on the Indonesians who sought to overthrow the regime as well as those co-opted into its service.

A vignette of the nature of the compromised position of the colonised is provided early in the series of novels through the description of the genesis of Minke's nickname, a play on the Bahasa word for monkey. This involves his internalising of a racialised taunt thrown at him by one of his Dutch teachers, but which is then innocently adopted by his family in a further twist to the initial humiliation. The situation is made all the more agonising by his first wife, Annelies (the mixed-race daughter of Nyai Ontosoroh and Mr Mellema), accepting his name as a sign of his native identity, saying "Minke is a good name". Minke can never tell Annelies the full story of the name's

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[13] GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature,* p 156.

origins in a racial epithet: "I've never told anyone what I thought, not even Annelies".[14] Her acceptance of the name is a painful demonstration of internalised racism and double consciousness.

While the themes of schism, division and alienation are not absent from Conrad's writing, the key drivers of the political arguments explored in *The Buru Quartet* are more sophisticated and nuanced. They speak of the need for inclusivity, not a movement narrowly defined along religious (Islamic), or ethnic lines. Pramoedya, through the voice of Minke, advocates the need for the economic empowerment of his people by their inclusion in the business of trade and commerce, and the recognition of the vital and transformative role to be played by women. These progressive themes are expressed by means of extended dialogues, giving a sense of authenticity, immediacy and vibrancy which are so much a part of Indonesia's spoken-word culture of storytelling. Ironically, this is a technique used by Conrad, but usually through the mouth of Marlow, whose verbosity often stretches the bounds of credulity. Implicit in Pramoedya's technique is the question: is this not the way that ideas are developed, through the interplay and friction of individuals engaged in dialogue, searching for solutions to the challenges with which they are presented? As such, Pramoedya synthesizes the human, interpersonal, cultural and economic forces that were at play during these critical years in the early twentieth century, and which were to form the basis of Indonesia's hard-won independence.

Pramoedya gave a clue to his alternative world view when he archly and succinctly summarised the plot of *Almayer's Folly* as "the story about a Balinese prince who smuggled guns to organize resistance against Dutch colonial rule".[15] I would suggest that these are probably not the words that Conrad would have chosen to describe his debut novel. In Pramoedya's works we see the

[14] Pramoedya, *This Earth of Mankind*, p. 40.
[15] Christopher GoGwilt, Pramoedya's Fiction and History, p. 156.

world of the colonised through the eyes of those who bore the brunt of what has sometimes been misrepresented and excused as the civilizing mission of the colonisers, bogusly captured in Kipling's phrase, "the white man's burden".[16] More often than not, we are surprised by what Pramoedya reveals. Inevitably, there are individuals like Herman Mellema who are painted as ogres or drunkards; however, such characters are primarily used as devices to make a broader political point about the corrupt and corrupting nature of the colonial system. It is more common to encounter sympathetic European characters. Significantly, these are often from non-commercial backgrounds. Two are of particular importance: the first is the crippled artist Jean Marais, a French mercenary solder who had been fighting with the Dutch in Ache and who had, as a result, lost a leg. We meet him when he has retreated to Surabaya, married an Indonesian woman and subsequently been widowed. This union produced his beloved and optimistically named daughter May. Jean Marais has clearly made a physically painful, but morally liberating, personal and political journey, which leads him to the adoption a humble local lifestyle, living on the small income he derives from his artistic endeavours as a painter. He may be physically diminished but, morally, he has grown. His relationship with Minke is sometimes turbulent and challenging, but always mutually respectful.[17]

The second character of interest is the young single female teacher Magda Peters. She teaches at the local Dutch school in Surabaya at which Minke, unusually for a native Indonesian, gains a place as a result of his intellectual gifts, in particular his skill as a writer and communicator. It is Ms. Peters who encourages him to pursue his ambition to become a journalist and to bear witness to the iniquities of the colonial regime. It is her own political activism against the authorities for

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[16] Rudyard Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden', *The Times*, 4 February 1899.
[17] Pramoedya, *This Earth of Mankind*, pp. 60, 70, 71.

who she works that results in her forced repatriation to the Netherlands, from where she remains in touch with Minke by letter.[18] The balance and roundedness we encounter in Pramoedya's portrayal of these Western characters is both surprising and in contrast to Conrad's drawing of the local characters in his best-known work set in the region, *Lord Jim*. We only need think of Doramin, Rajah Allang, or Sherif Ali to see the lack of substance with which they are imbued by the author. Even the most sympathetic characters such as Dain Waris and Tamb' Itam are two-dimensional and seemingly present solely to serve as narrative devices.

If their perspectives and portrayals of characters from different cultures divide them, both Conrad and Pramoedya are united in their preoccupation with the centrality of trade and commerce, both in the realms of the political and the personal. However, herein lies a Conradian contradiction, for in Conrad's work trade and commerce define the troubled universe in which his Western characters move, while for Pramoedya accessing and harnessing the world of commerce is the essential means by which colonised people may break free of an oppressive regime.

This is territory that Pramoedya explores as we travel with Minke on his own intellectual and political mission. We are drawn into his thinking about how best to leverage trade and commerce to the benefit of a newly-independent nation state. In volume three of *The Buru Quartet*, entitled *Footsteps,* we hear the following conversation with his religious teacher Syech Ahmad Badjened, during which Minke has an epiphany after Badjened declares "Trade is the soul of a society, Tuan."

Badjened continues:

> "No matter how arid and empty a land might be – like Arabia, for example – if its trade flourishes, so will its people prosper. Even if your country is blessed with rich and fertile

[18] Pramoedya, *This Earth of Mankind*, pp. 216, 231, 333.

> land, if its trade is dead and deflated, so too will everything be and so its people will remain poor”.[19]

The teacher’s son Thamrim Mohammed Thabrie enthusiastically agrees, adding,

> “Traders are the most dynamic people among humanity, Tuan. They are the cleverest of all people. People also call them “saudagar”, people with a thousand schemes. Only the stupid wish to become employees of the government, people whose minds have already gone to sleep”.

From this is born Minke’s idea to form the Sarekat Dagang Ismalijah (Islamic Traders’ Union) – the SDI – in the idealistic hope that, through trade, the nation could prosper and the different ethnic groups be unified.

In opposition to this positive view of the role of business we hear more Conradian tones expressed by Douwager, Minke’s doubting colleague at the publishing house he has established:

> “Commerce!” Douwager pursed his lips, holding back laugher.
>
> “Commerce brings the peoples closer together.”
>
> “The Europeans came here for the purposes of trade, Meneer, but always distanced themselves from the Natives. Indeed they often traded in Natives. The Europeans didn’t come here with the intention of trading with us. They came with canon and rifle.”
>
> “Whatever it was they used, they were still here for commerce.”

[19] Pramoedya, *Footsteps*, p. 338.

> “If I were to rob you at gunpoint, taking all your clothes and just leaving a handkerchief to cover your embarrassment, and then I left you one and a half cents, would you call that trade or commerce? And that is exactly what the Europeans have done here in the Indies.
>
> You forget that these days rifle and canon are also instruments of trade and commerce, “said Douwager, rejecting my argument. “All around the world the conquered peoples are being turned into the producers of goods for the colonialists. *And in some cases the people themselves become the objects of trade*”.[20] [italics added]

The implication of this exchange is important, for the notion that Pramoedya is exploring is that it is not the practice of trade *per se* that is the inherent problem: it is the way in which the commerce has been annexed by colonialism and directed towards its own self-interested, nationalist ends. The choices Pramoedya articulates through this exchange are clear: colonial exploitation or independent nation building; commodification of the individual or personal liberation.

In *House of Glass,* Minke’s ideas on the role of capital are given formal expression in a document which has fallen into the hands of Pangemanann. Significantly, Minke is preoccupied with the implications of the control of capital not only upon the colonised but also upon the ordinary citizens of the colonising nations of Europe:

> *It would be good if the Sarekat were to expand into an even bigger organization and bring together into a huge concentration all of the capital of the weak. That capital must be able to free them from their dependence. Private capital as a means of freeing an individual from dependence is also good, but not the best way. That kind of private, personal capital also chains you to a new dependence and drags others into dependence as well – it is the*

[20] Pramoedya, *Footsteps*, p. 342.

> *European model of capital. The result has been the absolute enslavement of almost all the peoples of the world out of the continent of Europe, and the relative enslavement of the European people themselves.* [italics in the original text].[21]

It was almost certainly the expression of radical ideas such as these which led to Pramoedya's falling foul of the post-colonial Suharto dictatorship. Suharto's thirty-year tenure as President was underpinned by the appropriation of capital, be this by his own family or the protection of trusted businessmen who owed their monopolies over essential commodities to his patronage. Ironically, it was through a Sarikat network of "charitable bodies" that the Suharto family sequestered much of the wealth they had amassed through the diversion of public assets.

Pramoedya takes the allied subjects of trade and the role of the *nyai* as points of departure to examine the distorting and contradictory impacts exerted by colonialism. Minke finds himself attracted by the notion that only by adopting the commercial technological ways and moral certainties of the Dutch can the Indonesians find true advancement. This theme is juxtaposed with his fraught personal life, in which his first wife, Annelies, dies as a result of a mental collapse, having been subjected to a forced repatriation to the Netherlands following the death of her Dutch father. Minke goes on to marry an immigrant Chinese woman, who becomes increasingly involved in the struggle against colonialism, at the expense of their marriage. In spite of the personal suffering that he experiences as a direct consequence of colonialism, we gain the impression that the oppression of colonialism has also caused him to disrespect his own culture. This facet of colonialism is surfaced by Frantz Fanon.[22]

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[21] Pramoedya, *House of Glass*, p. 169.
[22] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*.

Another related outcome of the system was to encourage those natives who wished to progress within its strictly delineated dispensation to demonstrate, through "performance", the perceived norms of the colonizer. This is an ascendant theme in the fourth volume of Pramoedya's *Buru Quartet*: *House of Glass*. As previously noted, in this novel the narrative voice moves from that of Minke, who is by this stage a political prisoner, to that of Pangemanann. Jacques Pangemanann, is aptly described as an orphan, being orphaned from both his biological parents and his native culture. We are informed that he was adopted by a French couple, who brought him to France, where he was educated in a prestigious institution in Lyon. He returns to Indonesia with a French wife and joins the police. As a result of his ability and education, he rises rapidly, and with his ascent he finds himself increasingly pitted against his own people as he is engaged to spy on the "educated natives" involved in the struggle for independence. The most telling image, which gives physical form to his agonisingly compromised position, is presented when he is promoted to the position of *Algemeene* (literally "General" in Dutch) and moved with his family to the town of Buitenzorg. Here, his wife is delighted to see the house they have been assigned by the authorities, the former home of the man Pangemanann respectfully refers to by his Javanese aristocratic title, Raman Mas Minke.

The subject of "performance" is one which has been explored by Homi Bhabha who in 1994 put forward the concept of hybrid space.[23] This is a space in which the colonised feel impelled to imitate the behaviours of the coloniser in a forced attempt to gain acceptance and possible advancement. The perverting effects of this phenomenon are expressed in *House of Glass* as

[23] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

Pangemanann describes his own behaviour towards his fellow Indonesians shortly after he has been installed in his new office following a promotion:

> An attendant in a white uniform, a rather good-looking Eurasian with sharp eyes and pointed nose, entered but seemed reluctant to salute me. He just stood staring at me.
>
> "Who are you" I snapped, offended.
>
> Finally, he gave a little respectful nod: "Frits Doertier, your attendant".
>
> "What schooling have you had?" I asked sharply.
>
> He seemed embarrassed, hiding his nervousness by fixing his hair; then he finally answered: "Primary school, Meneer."
>
> "Why have you entered here?" I growled again.
>
> He scratched his neck and tried to smile, without speaking. "Get out!" I ordered.
>
> He left without saluting. *My colonial heart was offended.* [italics added][24]

This curt exchange perfectly captures the essence of what Fanon and Bhabha have identified. In the elaborately formal and polite society of Indonesia, where great store is put on the notion of "face" (the preservation of a person's dignity), it is improbable that any Indonesian would behave in this peremptory, authoritarian manner outside of the social structure imposed by colonialism (or dictatorship). The use of education to trump the hierarchical implication of his attendant being a Eurasian (unlike Pangemanann, who is a native Indonesian) is significant, while the irony of the final "My colonial heart was offended" completes the inversion.

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[24] Pramoedya, *House of Glass*, p. 82.

Minke's intellectual and political quest is arduous and complex. As the reader travels with him, the multiple contradictions that are the product of the colonial experience are revealed through his inner voice. The intimate sharing of the lived experience of an individual, as he moves from teenager, to young adult, to maturity, draws us inexorably into his personal and intellectual development. We see the world anew, regardless of our own cultural experience or ethnic background. That shared journey is brought to a moving conclusion at the end of *Footsteps*, as Minke prepares to go into exile and is being helped in his preparations by the family's domestic maid named Piah. The passage of dialogue between Minke and Piah which follows is quoted at some length. This is to acquaint the reader, who might be new to Pramoedya, with his prose style and use of first-person narration and dialogue to increase the sense of immediacy. It is also to point up how the author's direct naturalistic rendering of a spoken exchange sits in contrast with Conrad's often ironised approach. An analysis of the passage follows the quotation:

> Suddenly she squatted at my feet. In a very gentle voice, but pregnant with protest: "How can you demand an oath from me, my master? An oath for my master, for my leader? Is it not enough that I am a member of the Sarekat?"
>
> "Piah!" I could not hold back my tears. Piah my servant, a member of the Sarekat! The second woman member out of fifty thousand men. I stood and raised her up: "Why do you, a member of the Sarekat, kneel before your leader?"
>
> "I feel that you are going far away, Tuan, and will not return."
>
> "Very well, Piah. I will not demand an oath from you. Stand up. Tomorrow give this letter to your mistress."
>
> "Yes, master."

"If you love your mistress, then stay with her always."

"Do not forget or neglect my mistress's towel, master. It is Tuan's duty to always look after it and to remember the wife of my leader, who is also my leader."

"I will always remember, Piah."

I glanced at Pangemanann and he was wiping his eyes. When he noticed me looking at him, he brought himself under control, and asked "Are you ready."

"Piah, I cannot go without leaving you something. All the keys are with your mistress. All I have is…." I searched around in my pockets. There were only some coins, about three guiders or so. I grabbed them all and held them out for her. "For you, Piah, take them."

She took them and put them back in my pocket.

"You will need them on your journey."

"No."

"You will need them."

"Then give them to the men from Banten." [the guards]

"No, it is we who should be helping you, Tuan. Leave me behind some words, Tuan, good words that I may remember all my life."

"Very well, Piah. Become a propagandist for the Sarekat. Call upon all women to join. Become their leader."

"I will remember, Tuan, and I will do what you ask."

"I must go now, Piah."

"You will always be in our hearts, Tuan."

As I walked down the front steps of the house, I couldn't help but turn and look back at her – Piah, a pearl whom I had never got to know all this time. Princess had taught her. [25]

This finely crafted concluding dialogue set in 1911 must be read in the context of the exceptionally hierarchical nature of Javanese culture (the Javanese language possesses three level of formality). The passage subtly brings together the intensely human, the political and the transformational importance of the role of women in the struggle for Indonesian independence. The inclusion of the seemingly mundane matter of the towel heightens the realism of the scene, reminding us of the importance of such incidental domestic considerations in the face of impending imprisonment. The fact that the towel belongs to Minke's wife intensifies the emotional effect. The business with the exchange of coins is pertinent, gesturing towards the practical need for even the smallest amounts of cash in the grassroots revolutionary movement. Lastly, the deft re-balancing of the master-servant relationship across the passage speaks of Pramoedya's frustration with the paralysing effects of the class structure that he sees as being baked into Javanese society.

The scene takes place as Minke is arrested for his increasingly assertive politics, as he seeks greater power, business participation and political representation for native Indonesians through the formation of regional Sarekats. In the course of this dialogue Pramoedya not only evokes heightened emotion, as we witness the human price paid by those who attempted to bring about change and justice, but we also observe how a traditional local leader undergoes a transformation in his understanding of the important part that will be played by women in bringing about the change he passionately wants to engender. In the opening exchanges, Minke is the traditional

[25] Pramoedya, *Footsteps*, pp. 463-64.

Javanese master giving instructions to the maid who has served his wife (herself a princess and the daughter of the local Raja). However, by the close he has assumed the role of a 'servant-leader', who realises he has been blind to the strength of this woman who has been tutored by his wife (another strong woman). He leaves his house not knowing where he is to be exiled and incarcerated.

This is the last time that the reader encounters Minke. Like many of Conrad's local characters he fades into the shadows; however, unlike Conrad's Asian men and women, Minke departs as a complex, fully imagined human being, whose character lives on in our imaginations long after we have completed the *Quartet*.

In the closing pages of *House of Glass*, we learn of Minke's fate, from the internal voice of Pangemanann, by this stage of the narrative a man reduced to a state of alcoholism as a result of the guilt he bears.   Nyai Ontosoroh returns to Indonesia after years living in France, the country to which she had moved with Marais, the artist and former friend of Minke. She has become Madame Saniken Le Bourq, taking on the family name of her new husband while also reclaiming her original Indonesian name – a union that allows for a positive outcome to a European and Asian partnership. She has returned in search of her spiritual son, Minke. As a French speaker and an agent of the state who had been charged with the surveillance and persecution of native leaders such as Minke, it is Pangemanann who is selected to look after her and to help her in her quest. In an agonizing irony it falls to him to inform Nyai Onotosoroh of Minke's death. She asks him the cause, and he answers evasively:

> "It was reported as dysentery."

> Her question made me nervous because I knew that the report about how he died was not in order and that Dr. Meyersohn had examined him but that it was the youth with the whip and the knife who had declared it was dysentery.[26]

Pangemanann continues:

> The woman behind me had crossed two oceans to find a loved one. And that person had been destroyed while in my hands. He had been destroyed, but he had finished what he had begun. From that beginning he had multiplied himself into so many people, spreading like fireflies throughout Java. Perhaps tomorrow or the next day they would spread outside Java.[27]

Together they visit Minke's grave, to find that his name on the tombstone has been blotted out with tar, clearly an act of vandalism instigated by the authorities. During the course of the visit Sanikem realises that Pangamann was implicated in Minke's death, saying:

> "I believe you had nothing to do with putting that tar on his grave," she said suddenly in Malay, "but everything else was your doing, wasn't it Tuan"? I nodded, shuddering.[28]

Pangemanann's debasement is complete, but in a final attempt at redemption he writes a letter to Madame Saniken Le Boucq:

> I don't think I need to explain to you about "everything else". As a wise and far-sighted woman, Madame no doubt understands everything. About the facts of what happened, it is

[26] Pramoedya, *House of Glass*, p. 354.
[27] Pramoedya, *House of Glass*, p. 355.
[28] Pramoedya, *House of Glass*, p. 358.

> all contained in these my Notes, *House of Glass*, which I now willingly hand over to you. Madame is my judge. I accept whatever sentence you hand down, Madame.
>
> With this letter, I surrender some manuscripts that are by right yours, the writings of Raden Mas Minke, your beloved son. It is up to Madame now as to what use they should be put to and how to look after them.[29]

In these final pages of *House of Glass* Pramoedya conveys the tortured consequences of what it meant to exist under the yoke of colonialism. Through the technique of revealing his own physical texts to be critical components of his narrative, he is signalling that they are the rightful property of those whose lives were irreparably harmed. This is a history written by the victims, not by the powerful. In so doing, he is marrying fact and fiction to reveal the truth. He does this in a manner which would undoubtedly have met with Conrad's approval, providing us with that essential glimpse of the truth that had perhaps eluded his Modernist forebear.

In Conrad's and Pramoedya's work we are confronted with a strange and contradictory view of the colonial and commercial worlds. It is one in which those who are the benefactors of a system that they have configured to be weighted entirely in their own favour are tortured by their own creation, while those upon whom the system preys discern how, under a more symmetrical relationship, commerce could be the key to their liberation and advancement. In both Pramoedya's and Conrad's Asian novels we are shown the corrupting nature of such an imbalanced world. However, for Conrad the effects of that corruption are primarily reflected in the fates of his European characters, while the Asian characters who are drawn into their dramas, are frequently

[29] Pramoedya, *House of Glass*, p. 359.

portrayed as stereotypes or in the case of his female characters often described in the language of the commodity trader.[30]

At no point in Conrad's Asian novels do we get such a clear-eyed articulation of the effects of the colonial commercial system upon the peoples of Indonesia as we find in Pramoedya's work. What is beyond question, though, is that it is through a "commercial" reading of both authors that we gain the most wholistic understanding of the centrality of business and commerce to the nature of human interactions. The struggle for the control of critical raw materials, trading routes and agricultural systems was at the heart of both the colonial project and the political movements of those who sought to overthrow it.

The centrality of the debate about the ends to which commerce is put remains as relevant today as it was in Conrad's time. While he may have failed to ask for that glimpse of the truth as it was perceived from the perspective of the colonised, it was he who first gave us pause to reflect upon the implications of a world profoundly out of kilter. As Maya Jasanoff writes, Conrad's world "shimmers beneath the surface of own".[31] It was Pramoedya who brought that indistinct image into sharp and compelling focus.

[30] Conrad, *Victory*, p. 64.and p. 141.
[31] Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch*, p. 7.

## Chapter Eight: A Journey with Conrad

After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings.

Conrad, *Heart of Darkness.*[1]

This chapter takes as its foundation the recent work of Rita Felski and her advocacy of Actor-Network Theory.[2] Like Felski, I contend that it is in the nexus between the text and the reader's experience of life that the key to the richness of a work, or collection of works, is to be found. This relationship is by implication mutual and is inevitably informed by the vagaries of chance inherent in any life, particularly one such as my own (and Conrad's), which has been itinerant and deracinated, engaged in the practice of international commerce and lived in cultures profoundly different from the one into which I was born. Consequently, I argue that an appreciation of change and transformation are essential to a truly rounded hermeneutic approach to a text. Unlike the more dispassionate review of the Conrad and Pramoedya texts which preceded, the tone of what follows is personal. This chapter is a memoir of sorts, in which lived experience and literary texts converge and interact. Read as a whole, the thesis will hopefully throw unusual light upon the texts and will explain my own life-long preoccupation with Conrad. To borrow the title of Felksi's 2020 book, it will explain why I became 'hooked'.

The chapter draws upon various Primary sources and recent Conradian criticism. I also further interrogate Conrad's claims to modernity in light of his seemingly restricted interest in the Asian view of the world and the issues that were perhaps the paramount concerns of the peoples of the region about which he wrote.  As Goonetilleke suggests, for Conrad "The East is not important in

[1] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales,* p. 117.
[2] Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*.

its own right and is treated as a testing-ground for the mind of the European foreigner".[3] Conrad himself admits in his author's note to *Youth* (1902) "Youth is a feat of memory. It is a record of experience; but that experience, in its facts, in its inwardness and in its outward colouring, *begins and ends in myself.*" [italics added][4]

It is in the context of my own shifting and unfolding engagement with the works that the originality of this thesis resides. Leveraging my lived experience, I will attempt to shed further light on both Conrad's primary aims and the possible reasons he may have omitted to ask for that "glimpse of that truth" about which he wrote in the introduction to *The Narcissus*. I argue that, while ironising and foregrounding the sometimes-egregious nature of Western colonialism, Conrad never fully appreciated the impact that this had upon the colonised. This is an oversight which becomes all the more striking when consideration is given to the centrality he consistently affords his lead Western male characters. As already demonstrated, a "commercial" reading of the novels reveals the mentality of commercial commodification which lay at the heart of the colonial project, the British model of which Conrad appeared to favour. This, combined with an exploration of the importance of scale to the success of any commercial enterprise, also provides new purchase on the works and their enduring relevance in the age of the modern multinational.

Only with the passing of many decades are we beginning to appreciate the magnitude of both the psychological and material impact of colonialism, as its trauma echoes down through the ages to inform the world in which we now live. Today, the turnover of conglomerates and multinationals are often larger than the GDPs of many countries, particularly those of "The Global South". The corporate balance sheets of leading multinational companies regularly display greater strength and

[3] D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, *Joseph Conrad: Beyond Culture and Background* (London: MacMillan, 1990), pp. 35-6.
[4] Conrad, *Notes on My Books*, p. 37.

scale than those of fragile and indebted nation states.[5] These multinational companies are now seen by some as the modern face of colonialism, a new manifestation of empire.

However, my aim is not to judge Conrad by the values of the present day nor to claim that he lacked prescience. On the contrary, his works were amongst the first to give readers pause to reflect upon the true nature of colonialism and nascent globalisation. Rather, I will argue that, in a world in which the forces of commercialism are growing ever stronger and truth and facts have become increasingly negotiable commodities, it has perhaps never been more important to ask for a glimpse of that precious asset, namely, a view of the world as it appears to others.

I must also acknowledge that, during the writing of this thesis, I have come to appreciate that I too, in the course of half a working lifetime spent in the countries of Southeast Asia, may have been culpable of forgetting to ask for that essential truth – namely, the perspective of my hosts. This is in spite of marrying into a Chinese Malaysian family and having earned my living as a foreigner attempting to meet the consumer needs of the peoples of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines. I engaged in this task while also endeavouring to make a return for the shareholders of the European-based multinational companies for which I worked. It is this realisation which reveals the enduring value to be derived from a re-reading of the elusive and much critiqued Conrad.

Change has been a pre-eminent characteristic of the last forty years. The past four decades have been a period during which the geopolitics of the world have been radically reconfigured. This morphosis is perhaps best symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent

[5] Li-Yan, 'Where Did the Term "Global South" Originate', *China – US Focus*, 21 September 2023 <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/where-did-the-term-global-south-originate>

rise of China as a world superpower, replacing the former USSR. Concurrently, significant shifts have taken place in cultural thought, in particular the radical re-evaluation of the impact of colonialism both upon the colonised and the coloniser. This has taken place within an era first dubbed "the age of globalisation" by Theodore Levitt, as he defined not only the changes in technology but also the convergence in social behaviour which allowed multinational companies to sell the same or similar products around the world.[6] These have indeed been interesting times in which to make one's way in the world, as I have been privileged to do since embarking upon a business career in 1980.

I was born as the sun was inexorably setting on the formal colonial era and as the UK's patrician Conservative Prime Minister Harold MacMillan was proclaiming the advent of the "winds of change" in his speech to the South African Parliament delivered in 1960. I grew up in a Britain which was attempting to come to terms with the loss of an empire while searching for a new role.[7] I was educated in schools which had their roots in colonial times and which had educated many of the young men who were to pursue careers in the service, management and regulation of the British Empire.

I embarked on my career as the world shifted from a trading model informed by the increasingly anachronistic nation state to one based upon regional economic collaboration as manifest in groupings such as the EU, ASEAN, Mercosur, COMESA/EAC and SADC. In 1995 this collaborative vision became yet more ambitious with the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The societal changes associated with this transformation prompted Francis

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[6] Theodore Levitt, 'The Globalization of Markets', *The Harvard Business Review* (May 1983), 93-94.
[7] Douglas Brinkley, 'Dean Acheson and the "Special Relationship" West Point Speech of December 1962', *The Historical Journal*, 33.3 (1990), 559-608 (p. 599).

Fukuyama to revive Antoine Augustin Cournot's notion of the "end of history".[8] I too bought into that optimistic view of a new reality, in which free trade would bring formerly adversarial nations together through mutual self-interest. However, three decades and one pandemic after the foundation of the WTO, many of the visions of this recent period have proved illusory. A mere five years ago, hardly anyone would have believed it possible that a major power would launch another war in Europe.

Nonetheless, as David Held has suggested, three decades of globalisation have, at least on an economic level, brought benefits: the integration of numerous poor countries into the global labour market and the establishment of global supply chains have lifted millions of people out of the depths of poverty.[9] Since 1990, the share of people worldwide who live in extreme poverty is estimated to have fallen from around 40% to less than 10%. However, both the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have been shocks that have mercilessly exposed the vulnerability of global supply chains, and at the same time destroyed the vision of a peaceful world stabilized by democracy and mutually beneficial trading relationships.

It is becoming increasingly clear that we will find ourselves in a polarized world once again, one in which it is no longer Communism and Capitalism which are pitted against each other, but rather one in which liberal democratic Western Capitalism is competing with autocratic one-party Capitalism as practiced by the People's Republic of China. The divisions, fuelled by populism, are deepening with disconcerting speed, whether on an economic, technological or military level. Supply chains around the world are being realigned as de-globalisation gathers pace. The events of the last two years would likely have brought an ironic smile to the weathered features of Joseph

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[8] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
[9] David Held, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).

Conrad, who had worked in global supply chains and whose scepticism covered the entire political horizon from jingoistic nationalism to global Socialist revolution. As Jasanoff suggests, Conrad was deeply suspicious of assumptions of enduring hegemonies, even that of the British Empire, for which, as I have suggested, he was not entirely without sympathy.[10]

My career in business has seen similar changes to those which preoccupied Conrad. They have encompassed both the changing nature of product flows and technological innovation. Throughout these changes, the works of Conrad have been my guide. In a sense I have, to appropriate the title of Michela Wrong's *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, followed "in the footsteps of Mr. Conrad".[11]

Therefore, it is of value briefly to chart this odyssey, specifically the years spent working in Southeast Asia and Africa, and the direct bearing this has had on my changing reading of and response to the texts chosen for this research study. It will also reveal why I believe a reading of the texts through the lens of trade and commerce unlocks new perspectives and elucidates their enduring relevance to our age.

Over the last forty years, I have travelled and lived in the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Czech Republic, Singapore, Thailand the Philippines and Switzerland. My time living and working in these countries has been punctuated by two extended periods managing businesses across sub-Saharan Africa, where my visits to the Democratic Republic of Congo were prompted more by my fascination with Conrad's most famous novel *Heart of Darkness* than the scale of any potential business opportunity that might have lain in that benighted country.

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[10] Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch,* pp. 257-258.
[11] Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

Retirement in Switzerland since 2019 has afforded the opportunity to reflect upon both the political and personal learnings derived from living in countries far removed from the Britain of the 1960s and 1970s in which I grew up. My time spent in these two long-established nations, neither of which has ever experienced the trauma of occupation, bookend time spent living and working in countries whose narratives have been profoundly impacted by various forms of colonialism. I am now the same age as Conrad was when he died; it is time to take stock and reflect upon the influence of his works and how both they and I have changed.

It was *Victory*, arguably Conrad's most misunderstood and progressive novel, which first stirred my interest in Southeast Asia. This was, in part, the product of his evocation of a region which appeared to be given short shrift in traditional geography lessons delivered in the prep schools of 1960s Britain. In those days, the study of countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia was primarily concerned with the raw materials – the tin, rubber, coffee and palm oil – that these now independent nations produced and shipped to their former colonial masters. This, we were taught, was used to fuel the "white heat of technology", a topic about which Harold Wilson had evangelised as opposition leader when he spoke at his first Labour Party conference in 1963.[12] It was perhaps this bias which initially sparked Conrad scholars to pay attention to the role played by the extractive industries in Conrad's works set in Southeast Asia and Latin America. This interest has intensified in recent years as a result of the growing awareness of the implications of globalisation, climate change and the impact of mining and petrochemical operations on the environment.

[12] Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 565.

In my own case, it was a tantalising notion, perhaps stimulated by early exposure to the “Imperial Romances” of writers such as H. Rider Haggard and John Buchan, then much favoured by British prep and public schools, which was the primary motivator of my preoccupation with Southeast Asia. Here, I surmised, was a part of the world to which a person could escape and where they might perhaps discover, redeem or reinvent themselves. This may, of course, purely be evidence of my own susceptibility to the Western stereotyping of the “mysterious” East first articulated by Edward Said.[13] Nonetheless, in Conrad’s portrayal of the region there was clearly something fascinatingly complex and opaque at play, even if this was only dimly perceived by his characters (and this reader) through a fog of uncertainty and misunderstanding. It was enough to make an eighteen-year-old resolve that he would seek the opportunity to make his way in what was then often referred to by the revealingly Eurocentric term, “the Far East”.

This opportunity presented itself in 1990 when I was offered a job in Indonesia. In spite of being a geographer, I found myself reaching for a map of the region to locate this distant island nation. I was reminded of Marlow surveying the blank spaces on the map of Africa after he had been informed of his own posting to the Congo. At the time, I had also been toying with a position in Canada, but was advised by a colleague to “go to Indonesia – you will come back with much better stories”. Similar advice was perhaps given to a young Conrad by his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski in 1874, as he sent the sixteen-year-old off to the trading port of Marseilles in search of a billet upon an east-bound clipper.

The multinational for which I then worked had been operating in the archipelago nation of Indonesia, formerly known as the Dutch East Indies, since the time of Conrad. As I had gleaned

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[13] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

from the official company history, the climate of Indonesia was ideal for the establishment of palm oil plantations, the source of that essential raw material in the manufacture of soap and a variety of food products. Like Jim's intended "experiment" to plant coffee in Patusan, the planting of palm oil trees had forced a radical change upon Indonesia's indigenous farming practices. This was born of commercial imperatives, as opposed to any more enlightened aim of "creating shared value" for both the company *and* the country wherein the trees, imported from the Congo, were to be planted.[14]

I arrived in Indonesia, jet-lagged after a twelve-hour flight that had taken me via Japan, the country that had once speciously professed the aim of liberating the countries of Southeast Asia from the yoke of Western colonialism.[15] The drive from Sukarno-Hatta airport through the dimly lit streets of Jakarta Selatan remains vivid still, even after the passage of thirty-four years. It was as though I had travelled to a foreign land for the first time in my life; the sense of passing through a mist, trying to discern the outline and nature of what I saw, was strangely reminiscent of a first encounter with a Conradian text.

I heard echoes of Marlow's description of the island of Patusan as "a distant heavenly body", as he suggests that "had Stein arranged to send him [Jim] into a star of the fifth magnitude the change could not have been greater."[16] I was even then seeing the world anew, if not particularly clearly, a reaction that was to be re-experienced multiple times during the two years I lived in Jakarta. If not a world of imagination as suggested by the critic Tony Tanner, it was one in which I grew to understand what it means to live with ambiguity, a sense that was never to entirely evaporate even

[14] M. E. Porter, and M. R. Kramer, 'Creating Shared Value' *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 2011), 62-72.
[15] Choi Jung-Bong, 'Mapping Japanese Imperialism onto Post-Colonial Criticism', *Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture,* 9.3 (2003), 325-39.
[16] Conrad *Lord Jim,* p. 158.

after I had gained a passable grasp of Bahasa Indonesian.[17] Unlike my British schooling, where I had been drilled to deal in hard facts and cold logic (like the judge at Jim's trial), in the East there appeared to be less hubristic certainty. I was to become aware that in an environment where institutions can be less rigid and robust than in the West, relations between people become paramount. As J. J. Clarke observes in *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought,* in Asia the individual does not command unquestioned primacy and it is the interests and imperatives of the community, however this may be defined, which are the more commonly recognised social currency.[18]

The first book I read on arriving in the country was Conrad's breakthrough novel *Almayer's Folly* (1895). Conrad was wise in choosing the early settings for his exploration of personal dislocation, for, as I was to learn, there are cultures where a failure to reflect, question and adapt will likely have an unhappy outcome. Only after living in the region for an extended period has the reason for the distinctive quality of Conrad's Asian novels become apparent to me, for, as Clark seeks to demonstrate, there are few other parts of the world where Western culture encounters such sharply different values to its own. In characters like "Tuan" Jim (the irony of this honorific is inescapable) and Heyst (the apparent rhyming with Christ is surely intentional), we encounter conflicted Western outsiders who have abandoned their own culture in search of riches (or perhaps some form of self-defined redemption, or simply sanctuary) in a different world. I was to discover that an element of Conrad's genius lay in his exploration of the effects of such cultural dislocation, and

[17] Tanner*, Conrad: Lord Jim*, p. 8.
[18] J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997).

the consequent revelation of the fallibility of the Western character, as I saw this being reenacted a century after he wrote.

Despite forty-five years of Indonesian independence from Dutch rule, the company for which I worked was still chaired by a Dutchman whose management style bore more than a hint of the colonial. He was once described to me by a colleague as "a man of strongly held views – most of them wrong": a latter-day Willems from *An Outcast of the Islands*. The company was one of the largest in the country; however, only a small minority of the shares were listed on the Jakarta stock market, allowing for the bulk of the after-tax profits to be repatriated to Europe. Nevertheless, some things *had* changed post-independence, the most significant of which was that the bulk of the essential raw materials used by the company were now controlled by local Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneurs with strong ties to the government of the then President, Suharto.[19]

I lived in Indonesia from 1990 until 1992, when, at the advent of Chinese New Year, an event not then recognized in Indonesia, I was posted to Malaysia. It was here that I became acquainted with one of the most important divisions running through Southeast Asian society, that between those claiming to be "sons of the soil", or *Bumiputras* as they are known in Malaysia, and those of the Chinese diaspora. This legacy can be directly traced back to the divide-and-rule strategy of the British and has contributed to Jan Gordon's identification of the trope of "partitioned sovereignties" encountered in several of Conrad's works.[20]

The overseas Chinese have made their home in Malaysia for many generations, long after their ancestors had originally fled China, some for economic or political reasons and others to escape from a personal crisis or the law. At a regional level, the commercial acumen of the Chinese

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[19] John D. Legge, *Sukarno: A Political Biography* (Singapore: Didier Millet, 1972).
[20] See Gordon, 'The Trope of Partitioned Sovereignties'.

community, coupled (in Malaysia) with the effects of political power being vested in the hands of the *Bumiputras* as a deliberate policy of partition practiced by the former colonial masters, has resulted in of over 90% of Southeast Asia's wealth residing in the hands of a demographic group accounting for no more than 5% of the population.[21]

In Malaysia, the political exploitation of this socio-economic division had played a part in the race riots of 13th May 1969, in which at least 600 mainly Chinese Malaysians were killed (a figure disputed by successive governments). As Agnes Yeow points out, such fracturing of society along racial lines was rare in pre-colonial times, when trading between different groups was commonplace, leading to a network of mutually beneficial collaborations. Yeow suggests that the undermining of social cohesion can be traced directly back to British rule.[22] The historian G. J. Resink strikes a slightly more ominous note as he describes the flow of goods during the pre-colonial period in Southeast Asia thus:

> The international trade carried on across the seas between…islands and realms outside Java, in a world where there were still few if any Western agricultural or mining enterprises, picked up high-quality market products – gold and diamonds, rattan and beeswax, pepper and edible bird's nests, pearl-shells and trepang, gutta-percha, dammar, and other forest products – and brought in primary textiles, rice and *guns and ammunition.* [italics added][23]

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[21] Syed Tariq Anwar, 'Overseas Chinese Business Networks in Asia', *The Journal of International Business Studies*, 27.4 (1996). 811-15.
[22] Yeow, *Conrad's Eastern Vision,* p. 15.
[23] G. J. Resink, *Indonesia's History Between the Myths: Essays in Legal History and Historical Theory* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1968), p. 321.

The ramifications of the May 1969 riots still echoed in the 1990s and afforded an insight into the importance of ethnicity to an understanding of business and trade in the region. There had been even worse racial violence in Indonesia in 1965 and 1966, when the overthrow of the revolutionary Sukarno regime had sparked "ethnic cleansing" which resulted in the deaths of up to half a million people, many of them ethnic Chinese. This reality was only officially acknowledged in July 2012.[24]

It was my discovery of Pramoedya's *Buru* tetralogy (1980-88), which first alerted me to the opaque and indirect nature of Indonesian society, particularly amongst the largest ethnic community, the Javanese. This prompted the epiphany that the terrible violence of the mid 1960s was never openly discussed during my entire time in the country, although rumour had reached me that the father of one of my close Chinese-Indonesian colleagues had been "disappeared" during the mass killings of 1965. I should perhaps not have been surprised by the reticence I encountered, for in the early 90s Indonesia was still under the rule of President Suharto, who had come to power in the aftermath of this unacknowledged pogrom. The absence of Chinese script in the country was no accident, as the printing of the language was a criminal offence.

My understanding of the interplay between race and business was further enhanced as I learned how racial segmentation was mirrored in many company organisations in Malaysia. Sales forces and distribution networks were overwhelmingly managed by Chinese Malaysians, the exception being in the state of Kelantan, which was controlled by the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia – PAS, a strongly Islamic political party. Technical departments were often run by Indian Malaysians while HR functions were almost exclusively Malay. The legacy of Britain's divisive colonial policy was

[24] Komnas HAM (National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia), Statement on the Results of its Investigations into Grave Violation of Human Rights During the Events of 1965–1966, 23 July 2012 <http://thelookofsilence.com/wp-content/uploads/Komnas-HAM-1965- TAPOL-translation.pdf>

still alive, if not entirely well. There was, of course, a preponderance of British company chairmen. Conrad's partitioned world was still clearly visible along with his insights into the complex imbrication of ethnicity and the practices of business, trade and wealth extraction.

And what of Conrad's attitude to imperialism? There is evidence to suggest what Yeow describes as "imperial complicity on his part".[25] She supports Stephen Donovan's persuasive contention that, although critics have been quick to point out that Conrad is "paradoxically both for and against imperialism", there is "a strong case for arguing that this paradox is a mirage and that Conrad needs to be saved from being misrepresented as sceptical about imperialism".[26] Donovan believes that Conrad's objection was to the manner in which the Western colonial enterprise was being conducted and abused, believing that this undermined the British Empire as a whole. As I have demonstrated in the chapter on *Almayer's Folly*, there are several occasions in the text where there appears to be an implied criticism of the Dutch, as opposed to the British, brand of imperialism, adding weight to Donavan's argument.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, I moved from Kuala Lumpur to a new posting in the Czech Republic. I was accompanied by Ying, the Chinese-Malaysian lady who was to become my wife. Six years had passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. We found ourselves transported into another world of ambiguity, one in which both the unwitting expatriate *and* the Czechs had to process the reinvention of a functioning social model following the demise of Communism. Ying was one of only two Malaysians in the country at the time, a reversal of Conrad's model of the isolated European in Asia. It was also my first encounter with an Eastern European country, one

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[25] Yeow, *Conrad's Eastern Vision,* p. 32.
[26] Stephen Donovan, 'Facts, Figures and Theories: Conrad and Chartered Company Imperialism', *The Conradian*, 24.2 (1999), 32-33.

whose travails with their German neighbours were once disingenuously described by former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain as "A quarrel in a far away country between people of which we know nothing.[27] It was time to revisit *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911).

On leaving Prague in 1998, five years of travelling the length and breadth of sub-Saharan Africa were to follow. Predictably, it was for Conrad's controversial *Heart of Darkness* that I reached. After the complexity of a rapidly-changing Central Europe, I naively assumed that doing business in Africa would be relatively straightforward. After all, unlike in Central Europe, my company had been on the continent of Africa for one hundred years. Notwithstanding the time they had been present, their best-selling brand remained the one which had been launched by the founder. For a time in April 1998, I lived under the comfortable illusion that all would be plain sailing as I travelled around the continent with my well-thumbed edition of Conrad's best-known novel.

It was while reading this in Brazzaville that I stumbled upon a passage which shook me from my complacency; it read:

> For a while I would feel I belonged to a world of straightforward facts; but that feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away.[28]

As compellingly expressed by Thomas Packenham, nowhere on the planet is the legacy of colonialism more painfully felt, be it in the illogical borders (many of them defined at the 1884 Berlin Conference), the impact of voracious mining industries or the replication of the divide-and-

[27] "A quarrel in a far away country between people of which we know nothing", Neville Chamberlain, BBC Radio Broadcast on 27 September 1938.
[28] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, p.114.

rule tactics of the governing elites – tactics directly lifted from the British, French, Belgian and German colonial playbooks.[29]

It was in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that Conrad's ghost was most readily discernible. No one from the head office of the company, situated on the banks of the grey waters of the River Thames, had visited this country for many years. It was from this location, close to where Marlow commenced his tale about Mr. Kurtz, that I set off on my own journey into the heart of the African continent. There was only one white man still stationed in Kinshasa: the kindly, intelligent Englishman Mr. R. He was certainly no ringer for Mr. Kurtz, but, like Conrad's creation, he was a man cut adrift, his wife and family having been evacuated to Harare. The DRC was judged too dangerous for expatriate women and children as a result of the on-going civil war. At the height of the fighting, the rebels surrounded Kinshasa; fearing for his life, Mr. R took refuge in the British embassy. He was no stranger to the country, having been posted there in the 1980s, in the days of Mabutu Sese Seko's reign. During his time as leader from 1965 to 1997, the country was judged to be a relatively safe place, Mabutu having wisely decided to ensure his own safety by providing his security forces with the latest automatic weapons (supplied by his American sponsors) but not allowing them to have any bullets.

Mr. R had been flown in to take over the leadership of the company during a seemingly intractable strike, which his predecessor's intransigence had made worse, to the point where threats were made to his life. Even prior to the industrial action, the large Kinshasa factory had almost ground to a standstill, the population too poor to buy anything other than the cheapest products sold by weight by the "Mamas" who worked the "wet markets". This was a country the size of Europe,

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[29] Thomas Packenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (New York: Random House, 1991).

"blessed" with the richest resources of raw materials on the continent. These included copper, cobalt, zinc, magnesium, coal, gold, silver, and cadmium. The extraction of the latter is essential to the manufacture of semi-conductors and mobile phones, upon which the developed world was becoming increasingly dependent in the 1990s. Yet in spite, or perhaps because of these riches, there were in 1998 only 700 km of tarmacked roads in the country. Katanga province was cut off from Kinshasa as a result of local insurgences and the only means of accessing this territory was by a perilous journey up the River Congo. During my visit, the expatriate CEO of a major brewery, the only other large international consumer goods company still operating in the DRC, was arrested and thrown into jail pending the payment of substantial "taxes". As I sat on the terrace of the crumbing colonial company villa which served as Mr. R's melancholy home on the banks of the surging, brown waters of the River Congo, I watched, like Almayer, the logs which were transported by its currents. High above, tracer bullets flew like the arrows shot from the jungle at Marlow's boat, lighting up the sky over neighbouring Brazzaville. I reflected upon the continuing relevance of Conrad's 1899 novel.

Sadly, the conditions in the country continued to decline to a point where it was judged that the business was unsustainable, and likely heading towards the fate of The Tropical Belt Coal Company managed by Axel Heyst.[30] The decision was made to sell the factory, and what little business remained, to a local company owned by an enterprising Pakistani family who had made the country their home. Years later I was to make the same call while working for another major multinational company with deep roots in the DRC. No other business decisions made in thirty-eight years has caused me such soul searching. The sense that the country, once regarded as *an outpost of progress* and a source of profit, was again being betrayed by Westerners was

[30] Conrad, *Victory.*

inescapable.[31] These sales are modern-day examples of the kind of “stranded asset” described by Jan Gordon, who writes:

> From one perspective, colonialism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century had already begun to create an assortment of potentially stranded assets in unfamiliar corners of the Empire.[32]

Arguably, colonialism was not alone in transforming erstwhile assets into liabilities.

Meanwhile in Cote d’Ivoire, another country in my bailiwick, a young Dutchman had been installed as the new chairman of a local operation we had purchased from its French founder. Mr. B was reputed to be a man in a hurry and came with clear ideas of the right way of doing business. On the surface he would have struck Marlow as being cut from similar cloth to Jim and recognisably “one of us”. Apparently believing that one of his Ivorian directors was syphoning off funds to purchase exotic cars Mr. B removed him. On a subsequent visit I heard it rumoured that Mr. B had also made remarks that impugned the man’s reputation.

I later learned Mr. B had been hospitalized with severe stomach pains and his doctor had recommended an operation, which was conducted in one of Abidjan’s hospitals. The next I heard was that the procedure had not gone well and Mr. B could likely no longer continue in his role. He was to be repatriated to Europe (I subsequently learned that he had left the company).

Many years later I returned to Abidjan, working for another multinational company. I had arranged to be picked up from the airport by a driver who had helped me in those earlier days and we fell

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[31] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales.*
[32] Jan B. Gordon, ‘Conrad and the Problematics of Rescue’, working paper delivered at the triannual meeting of the Conrad Society of Poland, in Krakow, Poland 10 October 2024, p. 3.

into chatting about our mutual acquaintance Mr. B. “You know he was poisoned by his Togolese chef,” the driver said.

In both Africa and Asia, it often takes the Western expatriate many years to decipher what has actually taken place. Conrad captured this reality through what Ian Watt defined as “delayed decoding”.[33] The technique is used to dramatic effect in both *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness.* This is more than mere theatricality or literary sleight of hand on the part of Conrad: it is a perfect melding of literary device and lived reality.

A coda to my time in Africa came when I picked up rumours that we had “a man” in Ethiopia, apparently stationed in Addis Ababa. I raised this with my Human Resources colleague. He was adamant that there was no such person and that Ethiopia was of low strategic importance. I insisted he checked the files. To his surprise, I was correct. “He is on a rather good package, including two flights to England every year,” my colleague added. Apparently, he had never been seen in the head office. I resolved to visit Addis and to track down “our man”. I subsequently found a man red of face, large of gut and with the smell of alcohol lingering on his breath at 8:00 a.m. when he met me off the flight from Nairobi. Having married a local Ethiopian woman, he appeared to have settled into a comfortable life which involved doing as little as possible to further the interests of the company. He could have served as a model for either Kayerts or Carlier.[34]

As mentioned, I was to return to Africa many years later. The passing of twenty years had wrought many changes. Several countries had embraced democracy, levels of poverty and hunger had fallen, and polio had been eradicated from all 47 WHO African countries. However, the most tangible change was the presence of China. In the late 90s it had been rare to see a Chinese person

[33] Watt, “Pink Toads and Yellow Curs”.
[34] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales.*

in any African country; by 2015 China was Africa's single largest trading partner, accounting for 18% of the continent's GDP. Chinese-funded infrastructure projects were much in evidence, road signs in the Angolan capital Luanda were bi-lingual, with more Mandarin than Portuguese to be seen. A new colonialism, was asserting itself in twenty-first century independent Africa. This was an economic colonialism less ideologically demanding than that of the cold-war era, but likely one which was equally pernicious. Dennis M. Tull perceptively writes:

> By offering aid without preconditions, China has presented an attractive alternative to conditional Western aid and gained valuable diplomatic support to defend its international interests. However, a generally asymmetrical relationship differing little from previous African-Western patterns, alongside support of authoritarian governments at the expense of human rights, makes the economic consequences of increased Chinese involvement in Africa mixed at best, while the political consequences are bound to prove deleterious.[35]

Conrad would not have had to invent Costaguana as the setting for his study of the corrosive effects of extractive industry and economic colonialism had he lived to see the present-day geopolitics of Sino-African relations.

I returned to Southeast Asia in 2003 to spend five years in Singapore. The reinvented "Asian values" of Lee Kwan Yew were still all-pervasive, in spite of his having stepped down from the role of Prime Minister in 1990 to assume the title of "Senior Minister" (a position which was to morph into the euphemistic role of "Minister Mentor").[36] He remained the omniscient narrator of the Singaporean narrative in spite of the appointment of Goh Chok Tong as the country's second

[35] Dennis M. Tull, 'China's Engagement in Africa: Scope, significance and consequence', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 44.3 (2006), 459-79.
[36] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Media, 2000), pp. 735-46.

Prime Minister. The clashes of Singapore's values with those characterized as "Western" continued to be called out in jingoistic terms by both *The Straits Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*.

The world had moved decisively from analogue to digital and there was no better place from which to observe this technological change than "the little red dot" at the end of the Malay peninsula.[37] Conrad had witnessed and written about a similar technological discontinuity as steam-driven screws replaced his beloved sailing ships, dramatically reducing the time it took to ply the route from London or Manchester to Singapore, by this time Southeast Asia's largest port. Similarly, the advent of the ironically-named "IT Solutions" (they were often anything but) had significantly changed the relationship between the corporate centre and the local operating companies that generated the income which supported their masters back in Europe. Many of my older colleagues who had started their careers in the swashbuckling years of the 1960s mourned the passing of what they perceived as a far more enterprising culture. They would undoubtedly have sympathized with the sentiment expressed by Marlow in *Lord Jim,* as he describes the dictates issued by the colonial corporate headquarters of the day:

> But do you notice how three hundred miles beyond the end of the telegraph cables and mail-boat lines, the haggard utilitarian lies of our civilization wither and die, to be replaced by pure exercises of imagination, that have the futility, often the charm, and sometimes the deep hidden truthfulness of works of art.[38]

Echoes of James Brooke (1803-68), "The White Rajah of Sarawak", could be discerned in the characters, and likely the self-images, of several of the expatriate "barons" who still headed some overseas operating companies. Brooke, a hero of Conrad's, is described thus in *The Rescue*:

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[37] President B. J. Habibie of Indonesia, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, 4 August 1998.
[38] Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 204.

> a true adventurer in his devotion to his impulse – a man of high mind and pure of heart, lay the foundation of a flourishing state on the ideas of pity and justice. He recognized chivalrously the claims of the conquered; he was a disinterested adventurer, and the reward of his noble instincts is in the veneration with which a strange and faithful race cherish his memory. Misunderstood and traduced in life, the glory of his achievements has vindicated the purity of his motives. He belongs to history.[39]

The passage is perhaps revealing not only of Conrad's views concerning Brooke, the man, but also concerning British colonialism in general.

The effects of globalisation were to be seen in the changing approaches of multinational companies to the Southeast Asian region. Following the acquisition of Richardson Vicks in 1985, Proctor and Gamble struck astute deals with individual national governments to build mega-plants for single product lines in each ASEAN nation. It was no longer deemed economically prudent to manufacture all products in every country. The container industry boomed as goods were trans-shipped between the ASEAN member states, benefiting from duty "holidays" that had been negotiated in return for much needed inward flows of dollar-denominated capital investment. While Singapore benefited from the confidence built upon its renowned probity and adherence to the rule of law, smuggling continued to thrive in countries with more "flexible" port authorities. As M. J. Vatikiotis observes in a chapter entitled "Greed, Graft and Gore", Singapore remains an exception, with trading rules and regulations still more honoured in the breach than in the observance throughout the rest of the region.[40] It was as though a glossy veneer, so apparent in

[39] Conrad, *The Rescue*, p. 4.
[40] Michael J. Vatikiotis, *Blood and Silk* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2017), p. 174.

Conrad's depiction of the global capitalism of his time, had been applied to a network of trading routes where the *Vidar* or *Otago* might still be fleetingly sighted leaving Jurong for Bangkok.

However, before taking the moral high ground it is perhaps worth reflecting upon the attitudes of the West towards the sea pirates of Conrad's day, as these shed light on some of the value judgements which appear in today's Western media. As Agnes Yeow reminds us, the law of the English High Court:

> (did) not differentiate between buccaneers of the Spanish Main and the pirates of the Malay Archipelago. In the legal and popular sense of the word, they were sea-robbers and therefore outlaws, pure and simple. The Malay pirate though, was strictly speaking, not a miscreant on his home turf. In fact, raiding or looting (*merampas*) was often seen as a source of supplying income for local chiefs.[41]

In 1888 Conrad had set sail from Singapore to Thailand to take command of his first ship. In 1915 he used this experience to craft *The Shadow Line*. The novel's ambiguous title is possibly an oblique allusion to the passing of some hard-to-define dividing line between naive young adulthood and mature manhood.[42] The novel's exploration of notions essential to Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) prompts us to ask to what degree we are the victims of the fates and to what extent we have agency, and are hence subject to the consequences of our own decisions.[43] There is no one action depicted in the novel that curses

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[41] Yeow, *Conrad's Eastern Vision,* p. 61.
[42] Conrad, *The Shadow Line*.
[43] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), pp. 9-35; William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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the narrator's ship, but there are hints of the supernatural. Meanwhile, there are myriad challenges faced by the crew as a result of the previous captain having sold off the quinine which could have cured the crew's malaria. The themes of fate, experience and maturity resonated strongly with me in 2008 as I "set sail" for Bangkok to take up my first position as chairman and CEO of a fully-fledged company with businesses across Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam. A year earlier my father had died. I found myself crossing a shadow line into a new realm of experience, one which I dearly wished he had lived to see. A re-reading of Conrad's novella reawakened the knowledge that we live so much of our lives distancing ourselves from the inescapable penumbra of our parents. Had not Heyst also journeyed to Indonesia to establish himself in his own right, and Almayer left the parental home in Java to embark upon a career in Malaysia?

In Paul Hanley's 2006 examination of the Thai monarchy (banned in that country) we gain the impression that, of all of the ASEAN nations, Thailand "the land of smiles" (as the tourist brochures would have us believe) is perhaps the most opaque.[44] Gone was the accessibility of Malaysia, born of that country's lingering cultural ties with the UK and the widespread use of the English language (I had been at public school with the son of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed. A former king was also educated there). Thailand is a country caught between two worlds, one which has experimented with democracy, the other of which is in thrall to the crown. There have been eighteen coups in the modern era and, until very recently, the country was under military rule. It is also a nation in which, as Roger Kershaw explains, a person can still be thrown into jail for ten years for the crime of *lèse-majesté*.[45] The country prides itself on being the only

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[44] Paul Hanley, *The King Never Smiles* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2006).

[45] Roger Kershaw, *Monarchy in East Asia: The Faces of Tradition and Transition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), p. 149.

ASEAN nation never to have been colonized by a Western power and, as such, preserves a unique culture. Other Asian nations sometimes dispute this assertion, pointing out that Thailand still hosts the largest US Embassy and intelligence centre in the region. Neil Sheenan, in his 1988 work on the Vietnam War, reminds the reader that Thailand provided a critical US logistics airbase in Ubon during the Vietnam war.[46] Such apparent contradictions can make Thailand a confusing place for the newly arrived foreigner. Behind the charming manners, delicate aesthetic and the calmness of the Buddhist faith lies a contrasting narrative of gang violence, extreme poverty and political division. In their 2016 work, Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker explain how these forces precipitated the street protests between the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts which I witnessed during my two-year sojourn in the country.[47] At one point these demonstrators attempted to burn down the tower block that housed the head office in which I worked. I was reminded of Giorgio Viola's close shave in the opening section of *Nostromo*.[48]

A further product of the poverty that we saw daily during our time as residents of Bangkok was the burglary which was conducted at our house while we slept. Of all the items that were stolen, it was my father's watch which grieved me most – an uncanny reminder of how Conrad privileges the temporal over the spatial. Indeed, as David Leon Higdon points out, the time appears no fewer than 2,027 times in eleven of his novels, the highest counts coming in *Lord Jim* and *The Rescue*.[49] In the prequel novel to *Almayer's Folly, An Outcast of the Islands,* Almayer feels compelled to keep his watch going, resetting it by reference to the cabin clock of his father-in-law, Lingard. Sadly, Thailand will always be associated in my mind with loss, for it was while living there that

[46] Neil Sheenan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 41.
[47] Pansuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Unequal Thailand: Aspects of Income, Wealth and Power* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015).
[48] Conrad, *Nostromo*, p. 17.
[49] David Leon Higdon, 'Conrad's Clocks', *The Conradian,* 16.1 (1991), 1-18.

we lost many of our belongings in a deliberately-started warehouse fire. Far more tragically, on our arrival in the country several of my management team were still recovering from the trauma of losing family members in the devastating 2004 tsunami.

In Asia one lives with the awareness of the power and unpredictability of the forces of nature. This breeds an appreciation of mankind's dependent relationship with the natural world. The converse belief remains prevalent in the West, in spite of the increasingly evident impact of climate change. In Conrad we often encounter characters who find themselves in conflict with nature and forces more powerful than themselves. In both *Almayer's Folly* and *Lord Jim,* Conrad uses allegorical images of logs being swept along by powerful rivers to convey humankind's vulnerability to "currents" beyond their comprehension or command.[50] Humankind's relationship with nature is explored in the innovative allegorical short story *Typhoon* (serialized in early 1902), where we read:

> The hurricane, with its power to madden the seas, to sink ships, to uproot trees, to overturn walls and dash the very birds of the air to the ground, had found this taciturn man in its path, and, doing its utmost, had managed to wring out a few words. Before the renewed wrath of winds swooped on his ship, Captain MacWhirr was moved to declare, in a tone of vexation, as it were: 'I wouldn't like to lose her'.[51]

The novel's ciphers, MacWhirr and Jukes, were to assume new imaginative relevance as I arrived in the Philippines to be greeted by Typhoon Ondoy (Ketsana in the global lexicon of Typhoons). Two-thirds of Manila was submerged in flood water and 958 people lost their lives. The journey

[50] Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*, p. 6; Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 154.
[51] Conrad, *Typhoon*, p. 62.

of personal growth upon which I had embarked as a fledgling "captain", responsible for two thousand people in Thailand and Indochina, was to intensify as I migrated east to take over a company more than twice that size.

The Philippines lies at the end of the eastward trade route and was to be my final Asian posting. In spite of being the world's largest seafaring nation, as measured by the number of its people who make their living at sea, it does not appear to be a country much visited by Conrad. However, in *Lord Jim* we do get a flavour for the kind of seafarer who was attracted to its lawless waters. We read the following about the ironically-named pirate "Gentleman" Brown:

> He was down on his luck – as he told me himself. The world he had bullied for twenty years with fierce, aggressive distain, had yielded him nothing in the way of material advantage except a small bag of silver dollars, which was concealed in his cabin so that "the devil himself couldn't smell it out". And that was all – absolutely all. He was tired of life, and not afraid of death. But this man, who would stake his existence on a whim with a bitter and jeering recklessness, stood in mortal fear of imprisonment.[52]

It was the Filipina journalist Carmen Guerrero Nakpil who originally characterised her compatriots as having spent "three hundred years in a monastery and fifty years in Hollywood". [53] This apt saying has become a phrase much loved, and oft repeated, by Filipinos. It gives an insight into the degree to which the country has internalized the *mores* and practices of its former oppressors, be it in the pervasive influence of the Catholic church or the inalienable right to shoulder arms. I had

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[52] Conrad, *Lord Jim,* p. 257.

[53] Gemma Cruz Araneta, *50 Years in Hollywood: The USA Conquers the Philippines* (Manila: Cruz Publishing, 2019).

certainly never lived in a country with so many highly trained lawyers, an obvious inheritance from the USA, and yet where there was sadly scant evidence of the rule of law.

This was a country in which it was common knowledge that an assassin could be hired for less than $100. Death threats were not uncommon, as my own experience bore out. As a consequence, my family had around-the-clock security at our house; an armed guard travelled in my car at all times, while a back-up car was employed in case of attempted hijacking. Every morning my young daughter was accompanied to school by a female guard.

One reason for this extreme security was the country's history of bloody industrial relations, the most notorious incident being the shooting of a leader of a Luzon-based union as he rode his motor scooter home. The perpetrators of this crime have never been apprehended, but the murder was still much talked about when I arrived in the country. Was his multinational employer complicit in his murder? Was he shot by members of the PKP (the Communist Party of the Philippines, founded in 1968) in an attempt to whip up even greater levels of hatred for "the new colonialists" – the multinational companies (of which I was, of course, a high-profile representative)? Uncertainty and ambiguity bred numerous conspiracy theories. What was beyond doubt was that the incident had sparked ongoing unrest and resulted in the assassination of other local managers – murders which have also gone unpunished.

During the course my Conradian odyssey, our daughter Sophie Wei-san had grown from infancy to adolescence. I was both fascinated and concerned to see how she would fare, growing up as what is now commonly termed a "third culture" child. During my time living in Jakarta, I had witnessed the uncomfortable position that Eurasians ("Indos") sometimes occupy in Indonesian society. I had seen how the Eurasian community in Malaysia, once a recognised group alongside the Malays, Chinese and Indian communities, had been airbrushed out of both the governmental

and cultural vocabulary of the country. I was also conscious from my reading of *Almayer's Folly* of the conflicting forces which act upon those of mixed parentage, like Nina, the daughter of Kaspar and Mrs Almayer. Fortunately, our daughter found herself embraced by a more inclusive vision of the future than the one portrayed in Conrad's novel. She grew up attending international schools in Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, where the numerous different races mixed harmoniously and the shadow of colonialism had been lifted. I was delighted to see that she was instinctively drawn towards the inclusive Asian culture which predominated in the educational institutions she attended and in which she thrived. Time spent with my wife's parents only added to this tendency. It was not until she came to post-Brexit Britain, at the age of fourteen, that she encountered a world in which her origins became her defining feature. Her school housemates immediately asked the now tainted question: "where are you from?" Sadly, this enquiry did not come from a place of enlightenment, motivated by the desire to learn more about this new member of the school. Rather it was rooted in prejudice and racism, and the resurgence of British exceptionalism. Perhaps I too had committed a folly in thinking that educating my daughter in the country of my birth would be to her benefit.

By the time I departed from Ninoy Aquino International Airport for the last time in 2015, I had read and re-read all of Conrad's Asian novels over the course of a thirty-five-year career; they had become an inextricable part of my life. At times, I felt I may have inadvertently stumbled into a Conradian tale. My experience of working in multinational companies had provided me with a unique lens through which I would continue to see the novels in new and changing lights. I took with me the understanding that, embedded in Conrad's Asian body of work lie insights which continue to resonate to this day: specifically, the notion that the implications of trade and commerce are inextricably woven into our lives, making it impossible for us to avoid engagement.

Furthermore, I had seen at first hand the complex and damaging legacy of colonialism, and how it continues to act upon the formerly colonised and the descendants of the colonisers. Lastly, I had seen the profound influence that multinational business, conducted at global scale, exercises upon those it purports to serve – an influence that is not entirely susceptible to our comprehension or control, in spite of our beliefs and assertions to the contrary.

At the personal level, I had come to understand that if we are to avoid the fates of Almayer, Jim and Heyst we need, through the vagaries of chance and the challenges of experience, to develop sufficient judgment and humility to decipher enough of the world to navigate a viable path through its ambiguity. This is a world we will never fully comprehend, but one with which we have no choice but to engage. It might be fair to say that I have found, as Conrad hoped for his readers, "encouragement, consolation, fear, charm - all you demand".[54]

But what of "that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask"? There remained that lingering doubt that Conrad had perhaps not entirely succeeded in seeing the world holistically, and specifically not from the perspective of the people amongst whom he sailed. After all, had he not been primarily engaged in the business of transporting commodities *from* South-East Asian to the warehouses of London, Manchester and Rotterdam, while not being directly involved *in* the sometimes-grittier businesses of trading with the people of the region? His was, by dint of his profession, a relationship at one step removed, a view from the bridge. By approaching the novels from the perspective of trade and commercialism and melding this with my own experience of half a lifetime living in Asia, Africa and Central Europe engaged in the practice of business I came to realise that I had been afforded a unique perspective: one which would not have been available

[54] Conrad, *The Narcissus*, p. xiv.

through a mere reading of the texts. It is my hope that this has enabled me to throw a new light on Conrad’s complex and sometimes conflicted relationship with the countries and the peoples about whom he wrote.

## Chapter Nine: Conrad, father of modern fiction or captive of his times: Conclusions

> Conrad's tragic limitation is that even though he could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that natives could lead lives free from European domination.
>
> Edward Said.[1]

The title chosen for this thesis, "Commercial Conversations", gestures towards the two central arguments that I have made. The first of these is that at the core of Conrad's Asian collection is the notion of commerce in its myriad manifestations, seen and unseen, being fundamental to the Western colonial project. Viewed through this lens, Conrad appears to be suggesting that it is commerce and its objective of value extraction and transfer which both motivates and controls humankind. It may be clothed in the imperial garb of colonialism or the more informal attire of the entrepreneurial trader, but its imperatives remain the same. In Conrad's godless world it is often the unseen hand of commerce, frequently conducted at scale, which exercises an almost transcendent, and fatalistic, influence over the affairs of man.

My second argument is the related idea of conversational exchange: the thought that authors and readers are engaged in a continuous process of dynamic dialogue. The primary conversation may be the engagement between the reader and the author's text, the meaning of a work evolving over time in light of the lived experience of the former. However, I have suggested that there are also other important conversations or interactions constantly taking place, and that these have a bearing on the purely literary dialogue between the reader and the author's text. These are the numerous

[1] Jacek Gutorow, 'The Paradoxes of European Narrative: Edward Said's Reading of Conrad', *The Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)*, 1 (2005), 195-203.

exchanges that the reader is having within and throughout their life, in my own case within the world of international business. As Felski argues, the reader brings a wealth of influences, views and prejudices to the reading of a given text, which are the product of their own unique lived experience. There is also a further important "conversation", one between authors across time. Here I have suggested that the works of Pramoedya are in dialogue with those of Conrad. I have endeavoured to represent this relationship as one conducted in a constructive spirit, the Indonesian activist building upon the work of the dispassionate *émigré* Englishman.

This conversation, that we as modern-day readers have the privilege of "overhearing", affords us a wholistic and enriched understanding of a critical period of colonial history, the ramifications of which continue to reverberate through the decades as witnessed by the events of 7 June 2020 in the former slave-exporting port of Bristol, England, following the killing of George Floyd in the United States. As the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was torn down and deposited into the Bristol docks, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was referenced by journalists and commentators, reminding us of Colston's investment in the Royal African Company (RAC).[2] This operation had a monopoly on the West African slave trade and used to brand their slaves with the initials RAC. Colston eventually sold his shares in RAC to the Dutchman, William, Prince of Orange. Ironically, the statue celebrating Colston's philanthropic works was erected in 1895, the year that Conrad published *Almayer's Folly.*

But what of "that glimpse of the truth" for which I have suggested Conrad may have forgotten to ask? Here, I have sought to demonstrate, through the use of Pramoedya's *Buru* tetralogy as a counterpoint, that there are an important set of voices and perspectives that are conspicuous by

[2] Tshilididzi Marwala, 'Heart of Darkness: The Falling of Statues and the Conundrum of Offensive Books', *Daily Maverick*, 30 June 2020 <dailymaverick.co.za/2020-06-30>.

their absence from Conrad's Asian novels. These are the voices of the Malay, Chinese, Arab and aboriginal peoples of the countries he took as his narrative backcloth. It was while developing this argument that it came to my attention that there are only seventeen references in the Durham library catalogue to *The Buru Quartet*, a tetralogy widely regarded as the pre-eminent example of Modernist Southeast Asian fiction and an important record of the anti-colonialist liberation struggle. By contrast, in the case of Conradian criticism there is an embarrassment of riches. This disparity is reflective of the continuing imbalance in the level of focus that is afforded to Asian writers in the West, allowing us a mere glimpse of a world of alternative perspectives. It is also an indication of rich opportunities for future research.

I have postulated that Conrad's view was always that "from the bridge" and that, as a man who had adopted the United Kingdom as his home, and English as the language in which to express himself, he was perhaps the victim of the biases, both conscious and unconscious, of his times. Consequently, Conrad conveys the impression that the British colonial model might be considered the least bad form of an otherwise iniquitous system. This was clearly the conclusion reached by Edward Said as he identified the seeming contradiction at the heart of Conrad's thinking. I have explored this notion in less ideological and more personal terms, highlighting that Conrad was ultimately focused upon exploring the impact of colonialism upon his central male European characters, Almayer, Jim and Heyst. I have also pointed out that Conrad was not fully alive to the sometimes-contradictory affects that colonialism exercised upon the colonised, particularly as these are reflected in attitudes towards commerce and its potential role within a revolutionary struggle.

However, if the contention that we should bring our lived experience to the critical appraisal of Conrad's work is accepted, I consequently have to acknowledge that this is also mediated through

the times in which I have lived and worked in Asia. These were days in which the hand of the colonial past, be that British, Dutch, Spanish or American, was still to be discerned. There can be little doubt that in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first there was still a glass ceiling preventing the most talented of my Asian colleagues from breaking through to the highest levels of management within the Asian-based companies for which I worked. The chances of these managers being appointed to senior positions back in Europe were vanishingly small compared to those of their Western colleagues. This was true in British-, French- and Swiss-owned organisations. All of the companies for which I personally worked within the region were chaired by Caucasian, European men. For the last twelve years of my career, I was one of that privileged cohort.

While arguing that Conrad was, in certain respects, the captive of his times, it must be recognised that we as readers also bring to his work all of the knowledge, perceptions and prejudices that are the product of our own experiences of the times in which we ourselves have lived. Therefore, to suggest that Conrad was a man of his time is not to do so in any pejorative sense, but simply to recognise the inescapabilty of that reality, while at the same time reminding ourselves that we would do well to step back and to consider the nature of our own engagement with a world which is at once opaque, unpredictable, and "teeming with life and commerce." To this day, there can be few better catalysts for such an endeavour than the Asian works of Joseph Conrad.

## Chapter Ten: Afterword

I am the world itself, come to pay you a visit

Conrad, *Victory* [1]

The TV journalist had come from Europe to interview me as part of a documentary that was to be made about the murder of the union leader.[2] There seemed to be a hope that I might make a neat story out of an incident whose facts were extremely murky, and which had occurred years before I arrived in the Philippines. As the camera rolled, the smartly-dressed Swiss journalist produced a document from her slim briefcase. She did this as if performing a conjuring trick. She brandished the papers triumphantly before me. She claimed this evidence demonstrated that the multinational owners of the plant had been implicated, along with the Philippine Ministry of Labour, in facilitating the murder. There was talk of a conspiracy involving other companies, hence the interest in talking to me. A document even purported to show that my company had entertained the Minister of Labour shortly before the assassination. I observed that I did indeed remember the days when our plant would be barricaded with containers to protect it from the fire bombs which were daily hurled over the factory wall. It was also true that I had lived through the chilling reality of the lengthy aftermath of the murder incident, and this continued to affect the daily life of many Western expatriates long after it had happened. But when I pointed out that my extensive first-hand knowledge of that terrible period (and at best, second-hand knowledge of any events around the murder itself) did not in any respect corroborate the journalistic allegations, the exchange drew to an uneasy and unresolved conclusion.

And how I wonder was it received when snippets of that interview were included in the final documentary? It would have been transmitted to an audience of French-speaking Swiss television

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[1] Conrad, *Victory*.

[2] "A Journey with Conrad", Chapter Eight of this thesis, p. 165.

viewers living over 10,000 km away. Some may have visited Asia for a holiday in the “exotic Far East”; many held pension investments dependent upon companies with extensive interests in Asia. Anyone who had knowledge of the case would doubtless already hold strong opinions I was unlikely to sway. Meanwhile, those who carried out the crime had long since melted back into the jungles of the provinces from whence they likely came, oblivious of the identity and motivations of those who had paid them for their trouble that day.

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