



## Perspectives on Conrad's Transcultural Protagonists in the Malay Trilogy

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Joseph Conrad, a writer of Polish origin, who wrote in English, could be seen as a precursor of today's transnational writers. It seems that few, if any, other writers of the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods had Conrad's open-minded view of other cultures. The variety of nationalities represented in his novels and short stories reflects his thorough immersion in the cultures that he encountered during his travels and proves that his imagination was not limited by imaginary notions of geographical boundaries. The present article focuses on the Malay trilogy where none of the characters seems to be complete or sufficiently able to express themselves. Self-identification is achieved dialogically in their interactions with each other, but also in the ways in which they relate to their own complex selves. In this process, Conrad deliberately reverses and/or deforms certain categories of self-definition.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad, Malay trilogy, transcultural characters, imperialism.

The main purpose of this article is to examine how the protagonists of Conrad's Malay trilogy, which consists of the novels *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *The Rescue*, are constructed and what makes them distinctive. The fact that all three leading male characters – Kaspar Almayer, Peter Willems, and Tom Lingard – are haunted by uncertainty of who they are, indicates that none of the protagonists seems to be complete or can express himself completely. Self-identification is achieved dialogically in their interactions with each other, but also in the ways in which they relate to their own complex selves. In this process, Conrad deliberately reverses categories of self-definition and/or deforms them on purpose. The observations that follow take their cue from Jonathan Culler's reflections on some major narrative strategies of character construction:

Literature has always been concerned with questions about identity, and literary works sketch answers, implicitly or explicitly, to these questions. Narrative literature especially has followed the fortunes of characters as they define themselves and are defined by various combinations of their past, the choices they make, and the social forces that act upon them. (111)

Following Culler's lead, I take the opportunity to explore the processes of self-definition and autocreation of the three protagonists, their pasts, their choices, and their social milieus. The leading characters of the three novels constituting the Malay trilogy – Kaspar Almayer (*Almayer's Folly*), Peter Willems (*An Outcast of the Islands*), Thomas Lingard (*The Rescue*) – can be seen as representatives of authoritative masculinity. They all possess the skills needed to play important social roles. According to Jacques Berthoud, for Conrad the individual subject is “as 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, can be understood merely internally but has also to be construed in terms

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of its location in an external world” (19). In line with this observation, each of the above-mentioned protagonists might serve as an example of the white, self-confident European man, who pursues his career and follows his dreams regardless of circumstances. Yet, a closer look at the way in which they are constructed reveals certain deviations from this representative role, as indicated by Linda Dryden in her study *Joseph Conrad and Imperial Romance* (195–199).

In addition, the transcultural impulses for character construction should be considered at this point in the light of König and Rakov’s definitions of transculturality. They argue that it focuses

on milieus and agents that act as connecting links between different cultural spheres. Here, the prefix “trans-” does not denote phenomena that are common to various cultural milieus, but highlights those phenomena that, while being part of various cultural milieus, also stand between them. [Transcultural] studies focus on acts of mediating and translating as well as ... [on] “cultural brokers. (94)

Each of Conrad’s key male characters seems to belong to an uncertain, loosely-defined cultural space. They trace their origins to different worlds, simultaneously paying the high price for not being entirely immersed in any of them, and, therefore, their transcultural status is not simply part of their personality specifics but represents an existential situation. Therefore, these characters constantly examine the limits of their selves in an attempt to negotiate between their different cultural backgrounds and can easily be led astray by multiple lies, presumptions, and illusions.

### **How the Characters Define Themselves**

Kaspar Almayer appears as an unfulfilled Odysseus dreaming of an uncanny return to an imagined Europe. He fails in all his social roles as a husband, father, and trader. As Andrew Francis notes, even Almayer’s “appearance suggest[s] him to be ill-suited in both clothes and situation. His “moving across,” as opposed to walking, suggests motion divorced from locomotion, movement disengaged from surroundings; someone in transit, out-of-focus as an individual, and on, rather than in, a landscape itself out-of-focus” (28). His great plans border on the absurd; nevertheless, he pretends to be very serious and trustworthy even when he gets drunk or takes opium. His pride and self-confidence derive from the trust he has in Thomas Lingard – the *Rajah-Laut* (which means “King of the Sea”) – and from the gentlemen’s agreement he made with him twenty years earlier. Almayer presents himself as Tom Lingard’s proxy, he walks in Lingard’s glory, as well as in his shadows, one of which turns out to be an orphaned Sulu girl, afterwards adopted by Lingard. Almayer marries her on Lingard’s demand but also in the hope of financial success. A marriage that would confirm the economic bond between families seems to be an old patriarchal custom familiar to the English reader; nevertheless, this marriage breaks the framework, described in a lot of Victorian novels. The business agreement between the two men does not change Mrs Almayer’s situation drastically, but Almayer expects the deal to improve his own position significantly. However, from a European perspective, marrying a pirate-born native woman is far from a perfect match. Besides, Kaspar does not rely on his own achievements, education, or family connections, but puts his trust entirely in Lingard’s authority, which, in consequence, makes him a dependent character. This is made clear at the very beginning of the novel when Mrs Almayer calls her husband to dinner in her native language, although she has learned the new language at the convent school and is quite proficient in it. In effect, Almayer is presented as being subordinate not only to Lingard but also to his own wife, or, at least, he does not play the leading role in their marital relationship.

A look at Almayer’s background reveals that he belongs to the generation of colonizers’ children, who were born in the colonies. He is the son of a subordinate official employed in the Botanical Gardens of Buitenzorg, who married the daughter of a cigar dealer from Amsterdam. The Botanical Gardens of Buitenzorg were the heart of the Dutch colonial enterprise on whose significance, as Andrew Francis has demonstrated in his article “Recovering the Ethics of Economic Botany in Conrad’s Asian Fiction” (2009), Conrad repeatedly reflected. Kaspar encounters all dilemmas typical of his background: he is

neither indigenous, nor European, and as a result, lacks a well-defined cultural structure and social points of reference. He daydreams about conquering the world but is reluctant to act and transform his dreams into reality. Above all, he dreams about becoming wealthy enough to be able to escape to Europe without any additional ideas or missions. His greed for money seduces him with the illusion that if he has enough of it, he might buy respect and become a valued member of a community. Another harsh lesson neglected by Almayer is that if he must pay for being accepted, then he will never be truly accepted or welcomed anywhere.

His peculiar marriage is overshadowed by Lingard's authority for yet another reason: Lingard is the one who took care of the pirate Sulu girl, sent her to the convent school, and found a husband for her. She was surprised that he chose to play the role of a father as she expected to become his wife in accordance with native Malay customs. As Dryden remarks, Mrs Almayer's hopes are governed by

her culture in the form of "the recipes" and "programming" posited by Geertz: her treatment of Lingard enacts the performance of her cultural programming. In turn, the impression she gains of Lingard's great power is the result of his self-fashioning as the imperial conqueror, according to the rules of his own culture. (18)

Presumably, it is exclusively her obedience to Lingard that makes her Mrs. Almayer. Yet, she consequently exploits her privileged position as regards Almayer by the simple fact of being Lingard's (adopted) daughter as well as by freely expressing her disregard for her husband both in Malay and European terms. Her figure, sketched at the background, though very vividly, becomes a vehicle through which Conrad critically investigates patriarchal cultures and reveals that it is not men but women who demonstrate qualities such as integrity.<sup>1</sup> More convincingly to me, Dryden argues that "the parallels that Conrad draws here are designed to strip away our expectations of the East as a romantic stage set for the performance of a predictably superficial romantic melodrama. He insists instead that what we will be witnessing is not an Eastern spectacle, but the unfolding of a recognizable human drama in unfamiliar environment" (19).

Almayer regards himself as a dignified, well-educated, reliable man with great aspirations and willingness to take risks in order to achieve them. He considers himself a good father but does not protest when Lingard takes his daughter Nina to Singapore and leaves her with the Vinck family to be brought up in the European way. Moreover, Almayer spends years without contacting her, yet he dreams about their close relationship and about going to Europe together with her. His ambition and confidence that he can conquer the world, are not only an illusion, but also a deliberate lie to himself that helps him cope with life. It takes the form of escapism. In my opinion, his readiness to take risks is not rooted in courage but in a gambler's attitude to life, based on the assumption that he has nothing to lose. It is noteworthy that escapism is also one of the distinctive features of *imperial romance*, a literary mode that was widespread at the height of British imperialism as well as in its later days. Dryden, however, remarks that the motif of escapism is represented in a very different way in Conrad's fiction:

Imperial romance represented simple escapism: its appeal lay in the ability to transport its readers away from everyday concerns and to immerse them in uncomplicated exotic romance. It was pure escapism laced with patriotic overtones and a zeal for imperial adventures. This is exactly the type of fiction that Conrad subverts in his early Malay novels, bringing him closer to the later fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson than to, say Henty or Haggard. (2)

The other character, Peter Willems, is largely a self-made man, who appears to know everything about himself and approaches the game of billiards and life with the same passion. According to Vinck, Willems "knows too much" (*An Outcast of the Islands*, ch. 1). The very last sentence of the first chapter of *An Outcast of the Islands* reveals Willems's plans for the future: he will be "solid as the hills; deep—deep as an abyss; discreet as the grave" (*An Outcast of the Islands*, ch. 1). None of these similes suggests

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<sup>1</sup> See Heliena Krenn, "Conrad's Lingard Trilogy" (1990).

that he is a gambler or an unfaithful lover, none draws attention to his material interests; however, they point to the paradoxes shaping him. In fact, Willems regards himself as a lord and even as a god, who rules his family and is superior to all Hudig's clerks, but as with Almayer, his confidence arises from his indebtedness to the same benefactor: Lingard. Lingard has rescued him twice, but Willems is ready to betray his saviour at any time. He remains so self-oriented that he fails to take into account the scope of Lingard's competition with Abdulla and does not realize that the sensitive points of his ambitions and desires make him a vulnerable pawn in their struggle for domination. Just as with Almayer, Willems's marriage to Joanna da Souza is arranged by Hudig who does not tell him that she is his own daughter. Their marriage is, in fact, the outcome of yet another business transaction. Willems is promoted as Hudig's confidential clerk, later becomes his confidential agent, and eventually, through his marriage, his son-in-law, but as he goes beyond the terms of his agency, he causes his own downfall. Willems's goal is to be indispensable and needed – a desire that can be attributed to his traumatic childhood. He was orphaned and sent out of Europe by his own father. As an adult, Willems transforms his experience of separation and fear of the unknown into a gambler's courage and a general attitude of detachment. He helps Lingard with the management of his financial affairs and pleases Hudig by making contact with the local traders and promising to discover Lingard's secret. In addition, Willems plays with the da Souza family by securing their finances and making them dependent on himself. His emotional vacuum consumes the expectations of everyone who is close to him without evoking in him a sense of guilt.

Thomas Lingard, the *Rajah Laut*, believes that it is his duty to take responsibility for other people's lives and this is repeatedly confirmed in each of the three novels. Significantly, Edith Travers calls him the "Man of Fate." His self-proclaimed mission, however, might well be one of the illusions he cherishes. Respected by the local people and the Europeans alike, Lingard pretends to be an expert at sailing, trading, and organizing life in various communities. Considering the narrator's remark that the Europeans know how to soften his heart by calling him *Rajah Laut*, he appears to be somewhat naïve and to be constantly seeking the appreciation of others. Lingard is the man who discovered the wealth of the Pantai River which earns him the fame of being the richest of all adventurers in the land. His almost demiurgic power seems indisputable: "I carry everything right through," he declares (*Almayer's Folly*, ch. 2). Predictably, he becomes an object of envy. Another significant factor in his attempt at self-definition is the uncertainty and the sheer physical expanse of his claimed origins – the sea:

Tom Lingard was a master, a lover, a servant of the sea. The sea took him young, fashioned him body and soul; gave him his fierce aspect, his loud voice, his fearless eyes, his stupidly guileless heart. ... Having made him what he was, womanlike, the sea served him humbly and let him bask unharmed in the sunshine of its uncertain favour. Tom Lingard grew rich on the sea and by the sea. He loved it with the ardent affection of a lover, he made light of it with the assurance of perfect mastery, he feared it with the wise fear of a brave man, and he took liberties with it as a spoiled child might do with a paternal and good-natured ogre. ... His greatest pride lay in his profound conviction of its faithfulness—in the deep sense of his unerring knowledge of its treachery. (*An Outcast of the Islands*, ch. 2)

What is more, in a conversation with Mrs Travers, Lingard admits that he feels completely detached from his British roots and more at home with the Malaysians (*The Rescue* part III).

### **The Pasts of Almayer, Willems, and Lingard**

Readers have only a vague idea of the three protagonists' pasts. Almayer was born in a good family and was brought up with care. When Hudig first employs him, his father, then a gardener at Buitenzorg Botanical Garden, appears very proud and haughty. Willems's background is humble and commonplace. He comes from Rotterdam, where his widowed father had to support a large family by working for one of the offices at the port. Willems is taken on board the ship *Kosmopolitet IV* from which he eventually

escapes to join Thomas Lingard. He learns English and helps Lingard with his business until he starts working for Hudig. Unlike the other two characters, Thomas Lingard considers himself a legend, and makes efforts to keep this legend alive. In just one moment of revelation, however, he confesses certain facts about his early life to Mrs Travers:

“Do you know what I remember?” he said. “Do you want to know?” She listened with slightly parted lips. “I will tell you. Poverty, hard work—and death,” he went on, very quietly. “And now I’ve told you, and you don’t know. That’s how it is between us. You talk to me—I talk to you—and we don’t know.” (*The Rescue* part IV, ch. 3)

Putting aside insightful interpretations of language and its role, I would rather draw attention to the absence of any common point of reference between Mrs Travers and Lingard. They belong to different worlds, and this has nothing to do with geography or language.

Almayer and Willems both work for Hudig, serve Lingard, and actively dislike each other. When Willems visits Almayer, the latter does not shake hands with him and goes on to urge little Nina to call him a pig, which is considered a terrible insult in the context of Islamic culture. Do these two characters contend with each other? Undoubtedly, insofar as they are both directed by Lingard’s will. A question arises, then, about Lingard’s actual plans for them.

### **The Choices That Almayer, Willems, and Lingard Make**

Almayer and Willems make choices that are intended to ensure their high positions in the hierarchy of other powerful white men. However, they are unsuccessful. Almayer marries Lingard’s adopted Sulu daughter hoping to inherit Lingard’s treasures, Willems marries Joanna da Souza to fulfil Hudig’s will, in complete ignorance of the fact that she is Hudig’s own daughter. None of these marriages is happy, or successful in economic terms. Lingard makes his own choices, or at least he demonstrates that he is making them, which indirectly points to demonstration as his most effective tool of communication. In all his decisions, he is guided by the ambition to score victories in all areas that white men compete in. His choice to rescue Hassan and Immada, the Wajo leader and his sister, turns the course of his life into the opposite direction. Thus, paradoxically, the King of the Sea becomes the guardian of the new rulers in the world that he was supposed to conquer. In terms of representation, none of the three characters possesses the kind of coherence that adventurous conquerors or romantic lovers have in traditional imperial romances .

The past of each of the three characters under consideration has been shaped by different cultures and languages, diverse values, and varying aesthetic patterns. All three claim to belong to European culture but they do not know it in depth and have hardly experienced it directly. As a result, their sense of belonging remains unclear and is mediated by the experience of others. Everything Almayer knows about Europe comes from his mother’s memories. Taking into consideration his disposition to addiction, one can argue that the quest for European identity has long been one of his strongest obsessions, as well as a way of escaping from the unpleasant situations that he has had to experience. Yet, such situations do not seem to have changed his conviction. After the Vinck family has sent Nina back to him, there is no reason for him to believe that she will ever be accepted by middle-class European society, but he never gives up his dream about both of them being accepted eventually. Nina seems to also share this dream. In fact, I suggest that rather than being a dream, their shared aspirations take the form of an escapist excuse, and while they do appear to share it, they are attempting to compensate for their own inadequacy. In my opinion, Almayer’s longing for Europe is just a lie to hide his failures. This unachievable goal helps him justify his passivity. Almayer is not understood either by the local people or by the incoming Europeans. He plays with political colonial interests and derives benefits from this.

Peter Willems, born in Rotterdam, finds his place on Lingard’s ship. Willems believes in himself to the extent of attempting to flatter and seduce everyone around him. This nurtures his vanity and, in his view, provides evidence of his superiority over his wife’s family and the workers at Hudig’s company.

Blinded by self-love, he regards himself as the centre of the universe but loses control completely when sexual desires take over. As Hayes argues, he is a tyrannical character like “Thrasymachus in Plato’s *The Republic* and Callicles in *Gorgias*” (104). The harsh lesson that Willems has to learn makes him aware of the simple truth that the world can exist without him, and he is not indispensable. Willems acts as an embodiment of colonial power but this is largely a compensatory reaction on his part. Paradoxically, leaving Europe is his chance for a better life as was the case with many other impoverished European children. To him Europe means poverty and neglect, a lack of opportunities, expectations, and hopes. Therefore, the sophisticated image of a rich Europe is problematized by his individual experience. As he is not an adventure seeker, a pirate, or an apostle of civilization, one wonders whether he, indeed, adheres to any cultural patterns that were considered mainstream at that time.

Mr Vinck, who works as a treasurer in Hudig & Co., discovers Willems’s misconduct and informs Hudig about it, which ruins Willems’s reputation. In consequence, Willems’s wife turns him out of the house. It is Lingard, who, having heard of his misfortune, helps him by taking him to Almayer. Lingard also reveals to Willems the truth about his marriage. The irony of this situation proves that Willems is blinded and detached from reality.

As already remarked, Willems and Almayer actively dislike each other from the very beginning of their association. Lingard jealously guards his interests with the Malay traders; he is determined to prevent them from signing a commercial agreement with the Arab trader Abdulla. For this reason, he supports Patalolo, the Rajah of Sambir, an adventurer who, together with Balabatchi and Omar el Badavi, intends to use Willems’s love-affair with Aissa to destroy Lingard’s influence. As a result, Lingard loses his exclusive control over the river, Willems loses his life at the hands of Aisa, Almayer loses his dreams and dies as an isolated opium addict.

Lingard makes various choices and takes responsibility for them or at least he suffers the consequences. What makes this character outstanding is his attitude to the local people and their culture. His desire to be rich is only a tool to gain respect and independence from any political faction, but his greatest pride is his knowledge about the sea, its isles, and its people.

Thus, in *The Rescue*, when Lingard parts with Mr and Mrs Travers, his decision to head in the opposite direction can be read as a symbolic gesture in his quest for freedom. Lingard needs this detour to confirm that his way of being European in the east means that he is the protector, rather than the conqueror of the local people. He does not want to prove himself to anyone and is aware that people are generally afraid of him as they are not sure about what he really thinks. He presents himself as a person who cherishes solitude and can consciously transgress various lines of cultural difference between east and west.

In conclusion, it becomes evident that all choices made by Conrad’s male protagonists in the Malay trilogy are determined by rivalry and ambition, as noted by Roberts:

European, Malay and Arab men are engaged in various forms of competition, bonding and hostility around the commercial and politics rivalries of late nineteenth-century imperialism, while women, characteristically presented as of mixed race, figure as temptation, danger, affliction and objects of desire or hope for the European males. Thus in Conrad’s first two novels, the emphasis is on rivalry, competition and aggression between men. There are some significant male bonds, but these turn out to be insecurely based, and generally lead to betrayal and punishment. (14)

The ways in which the trilogy’s protagonists make choices and take decisions signify how different they are from Abdulla or Balabatchi. However, the “European” way of making choices is affected by individual obsessions, traumas and, most significantly, by the lack of a clear, sustained, and shared objective. Therefore, it can be argued that Conrad individualizes the colonial encounter and foregrounds his reflection on imperialism as an extension of individual male domination that fails to comply with a coherent pattern of masculinity.

## Towards a Tentative Conclusion

Conrad's readers encounter only flashes and glimpses of the three protagonists' background stories, or, rather, they must deduce them from the protagonists' behaviour and what transpires about their motives. The key male protagonists of the Malay trilogy are in fact constructed *subversively*, with a fine sense of their backgrounds and psychological reasons for the choices that they make. They can be seen as representative of the quest for dominance embodied in the white European man, but at the same time, they embrace it subversively as they are themselves subordinate and placed in a complicated hierarchy of positions, wealth, emotions, and ambitions. In my opinion, all three male protagonists are transcultural and largely self-made out of the fragments of stories, other people's memories, and pieces of acquired knowledge. They observe and adjust themselves to circumstances, respect local culture, or, at any rate, show respect for it by accepting the rules of the natives without giving up their sense of superiority. Their flexibility ends where the independence of others begins. Surprisingly, this distinction is drawn most clearly by several female characters: Mrs Almayer, Nina, Aisa, Mrs Travers, and even Immada and Joanna da Sousa. Each of them makes her own decisions secretly and defines masculinity indirectly, which altogether proves the outstanding mastery of Conrad's writing.

The problem of adequate interpretation of Conrad's fiction has been raised on many occasions and it draws critical attention to the fact that every reading of a given literary work repeats and imitates a process of translation, as formulated in H. G. Gadamer's hermeneutics and elaborated further in the work of other theoreticians, most notably in Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where he states that "there is more truth in the later efficacy of a text, in the series of its subsequent readings, than in its supposedly 'original' meaning" (214). Definitely, Conrad does not address psychological problems of the "third culture" kind directly; however, he points towards them. Similarly, he does not expand his reflection on feminism in the colonial context but sketches concisely the challenges of femininity (see Jones) and masculinity (Roberts 13–43).

The Malay trilogy represents Europe as a continent to be *discovered* or rather *un-covered*, not simply understood as the traditional exemplary paradigm of reference and values. Almayer's followers, who idealize Europe, are sentenced to disillusionment. Willems's seductive and self-confident followers lose all sense of reality by blindly following their desires. As a matter of fact, none of those desires envisages a return to Europe. Those mesmerized by Lingard seek freedom in the interstices of cultural belonging, and eventually must accept their distinctive and multiplied solitude. In the end, neither European, nor Malay culture is criticized in the Malay trilogy; rather, it is human weakness that is the object of castigation. Human weakness, it must be stressed, is an entity that manifests itself beyond the manifold categories of race, language, nationality, or religion.

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