"Karain" and "The Lagoon": Crimes of Passion and Acts of Betrayal

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Abstract

This paper examines the themes of unpremeditated actions, moral ambiguity, and questions of loyalty in Joseph Conrad's *The Lagoon* and *Karain: A Memory*. By delving into the impulsive and morally complex decisions of characters, the study explores Conrad's engagement with human behaviour and the fluidity of ethical boundaries in colonial and intercultural contexts. Drawing upon primary texts and critical secondary literature, the analysis situates these stories within the broader framework of Conrad's oeuvre and the historical tensions of imperialism and loyalty. The paper also interrogates the symbolic interplay between narrative structure and thematic content, addressing how Conrad portrays moments of crisis and their aftermath, both in personal relationships and collective allegiance. Through this lens, the study aims to elucidate the resonance of Conrad's storytelling in grappling with universal questions of human conduct and the fragility of moral certainties.

Keywords: Karain, The Lagoon, Conrad, Crime, Betrayal, Postcolonial

Introduction

Joseph Conrad's popularity in Poland was not always high, though the interest in his personality dates back to the end of nineteenth century. Had Conrad been only a prosperous English captain living abroad, the Poles would never have bothered too much about him. But

he was a writer, and it was his reputation as an English novelist that started the controversy over his "desertion" of Poland. However, the curious thing about this discussion of Conrad's desertion was that it began actually before he won widespread recognition in England. The Polish novelist Eliza Orzeskowa[1] severely censured Conrad in an article published in 1899 for being an alleged careerist, writing popular, lucrative novels in English (Carabine 83). It was unintentionally ironic; at the time Conrad was struggling against poverty, in spite of good press reviews.

The hypothesis that Conrad suffered guilt at having left Poland was first worked out by Gustav Morf in his psychoanalytic study. Much has been made of it since then. Conrad's dual loyalty to Poland and England—with the evident supremacy of the latter—constituted a constant source of distress for him. He tried to assure his compatriots that he could not write in English. He belittled his own literary work in the early days of his writing career as unworthy of the Polish literature, claiming he wrote only to earn a living that his type of talent was sufficient for the English only. He told Wincent Lutoslawski; "I value our beautiful Polish literature too much to bring into it my clumsy efforts, but for the English my gifts are sufficient and secure me my daily bread." (Carabine77)

The themes of betrayal, desertion, failing one's duty and the resulting guilt are recurring motifs in Conrad's fictional as well as non-fictional works. In *The Mirror of the Sea*, Conrad describes his feelings of disbelief, shock, and shamefacedness when he learned that Cesar Cervoni, the nephew of his friend and padrone Dominic Cervoni, had betrayed their contraband gang—a betrayal that contributed to Conrad's profound personal turmoil and his own suicide attempt in Marseilles shortly afterward (Ch. 43). And much of *A Personal Record,* deals with Conrad's sudden emigration to England from Poland, it is not clear if he saw it as amounting

[1] Orzeskowa protested most vehemently:" Creative talent forms the very crown of the tree, the pinnacle of the tower, the life blood of the nation in order to pass it on to the Anglo-Saxons (who anyway lie on a bed of roses) just because they pay better…. It is even hard to think about it without shame…." (Carabine 83)

to betrayal but he conceded that he still found himself answering accusations made at the time against him. Interestingly he used the same word "jump" to describe his leaving Poland as Jim's desertion of *Patna*: "Mine was the only case of a boy of my nationality and antecedents taking a, so to speak, standing *jump* out of his racial surroundings and associations." (Moser 20).

Conrad's statement in *A Personal Record* offers a clue to the interpretation of all his works: "Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world rests on a few very simple ideas: so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests, notably among others, on the idea of Fidelity." (Hewitt 336). It follows that that Conrad sees loyalty and service as the central virtues.

A brief look at his works would show how he dealt with the above themes differently, and his continuity with the same preoccupation. It occurs in traces in *Almayers Folly*, comes out more clearly in *An Outcast of the Islands*, and becomes central in *Lord Jim* and *Under Western Eyes* and in the short stories "The Lagoon" and "Karain".

Joseph Conrad's *"Karain: A Memory"* and *"The Lagoon"* challenge the ideological foundations of British imperialism by exposing the instability of moral authority, perception, and narrative truth. While *Karain* reveals, as David Adams argues, the deceptive and "counterfeit" nature of imperial power through the symbolic sixpence, it also, as Agnes Yeow suggests, foregrounds the unreliability of vision and knowledge. *The Lagoon* extends this critique by depicting colonial and indigenous worlds alike as governed by guilt, loss, and irresolvable moral ambiguity. Together, the stories blur the distinction between Western rationality and Eastern "superstition," suggesting that both are shaped by illusion and psychological unrest. In line with Andrew Purssell's argument, Conrad's Malayan fiction demonstrates that imperial encounter is not external to modernism but central to it, as these

narratives expose fractured identities, unstable meanings, and the impossibility of authoritative storytelling.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative literary analysis of Conrad's "The Lagoon" and "Karain: A Memory", grounded in close textual reading and supported by critical secondary literature. It examines narrative structure, character development, and symbolic elements to understand the portrayal of betrayal and loyalty. Postcolonial theoretical perspectives are applied to assess colonial attitudes and representation. Comparative analysis highlights similarities and differences in thematic treatment and narrative innovation. The research draws on historical context and Conrad's biographical background to deepen the interpretive framework.

Results

Analysis reveals that both stories centre on a Malay protagonist who commits betrayal by killing a close companion to secure a woman's love. Karain employs a narrative innovation with the English trader as an active participant and narrator, while "The Lagoon" features a more traditional omniscient narrator. The stories differ in tone and resolution: Karain ends with humour and a positive note, whereas "The Lagoon" concludes tragically. Colonial perspectives permeate the narratives, with Karain oscillating between racial stereotyping and attempts at equality. Both protagonists experience psychological torment and moral ambiguity, symbolised through motifs of darkness, illusion, and memory. The concept of fidelity is complex, involving conflicting loyalties that generate existential tension.

Discussion

The basic theme of "Karain" is similar to that of "The Lagoon". In both, a Malay warrior hero kills a companion (a best friend in one and a brother in the other) in order to win a woman. Afterwards, the woman having been drawn away, he tells the story of this betrayal to a white

audience. The theme of betrayal is a major Conradian preoccupation that would continue through many later novels and stories. Conrad noticed the similarity between the two much later. Seemingly uncomfortable with the similarity he explains to the readers that "the idea at the back is very different." (author's note,11). Admittedly there is some difference as well the most obvious being is that while "Karain" ends on a happy note with elements of humour in it," The Lagoon" has a tragic end. "Karain: A Memory" foregrounds two levels of memory—Karain's own experience of his youthful past and the memory of the white traders who had been to the Malay Archipelago. The story marks an important technical innovation in Conrad. It is for the first time that the narrator is also an actor in the drama and comes to share the stage with the central character. (Nigel ed. 92). He came to employ the technique of a story within a story in his later fiction. Marlow, the author's mouthpiece, made his appearance as the narrator the following year in *Youth*. He resurfaces in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* with a much more complex role.

The unnamed English trader both introduces and liberally comments upon the inner story and its teller. Although, he has been referred to as a Marlow prototype, this narrator lacks Marlow's perception and discernment; he has far fewer doubts and misgivings about his own approach to the world he enters.

The merits of this device are explained by Ford Madox Ford, Conrad's friend and collaborator, in *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*: "If your yearning to amend the human race is so great that you can't possibly keep your fingers out of the watch-springs there is a device that you can adopt….You must then invent, justify, and set going in your novel a character who can convincingly express your views." (Stewart 92)

This technique suited Conrad for it gave him a chance to view a character, situation and an event through different perspective and different consciousnesses. The author gets to express some of his own views without any authorial intrusion. The narrator who is a witness or a

participant in the drama is usually an intelligent and sensitive person who provides a convincing commentary on the situation. He also lends authenticity to the story. The narrator's closeness to his own self is evident through his Author's Note to *Youth* published in 1917: "He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony." (Stewart 92)

The narrator is one of a group of three Westerners who once visited the Eastern Archipelago. Here they meet Karain, a warlord and the chief of three villages. He is a great leader, adept at the art of war. Yet his behaviour shows he has had a dark past. Though a valiant man, he can never bear to be alone: "Even when he eats and sleeps there is always one on the watch near him who has strength and weapon." (Conrad 19) He would start suddenly and look around for the reassuring presence of his old sword-bearer, who follows him like a shadow. The Europeans and the villagers are perplexed at Karain's apparently irrational fear for he is brave enough to face an army.

Two years later, the traders learn Karain's sword-bearer had died. The chief himself has not been seen for five days. He does not emerge from seclusion even to welcome in his customary manner the officers of the English ship, which has arrived, with another load of contraband ammunition for him. So, the visitors depart without meeting him. Conrad creates a moment of expectancy and intense drama by describing the scene of a ship leaving the coast on a stormy night. The violent lightning and thunder are ominous and suggests a moment of crisis. Appearing on board, dripping and looking pale and haggard, Karain startles the men. He has come swimming all the way to meet them. Looking dazed, he recounts an episode that took place fifteen years ago.

Karain's brother was a ruler and he himself the chief of a stockade that collected toll tax from passing boats. He had a friend called Pata Matara, the brave chief of a cluster of villages. His beautiful sister fled from her people to live with a Dutchman who has come to

stay amidst them for trade. Matara felt disgraced as she had been betrothed to another man. He asked the Dutch to give her up so that she could be killed for her misdemeanour. The Dutch flat refused. Karain's brother called a council. It was decided that they be left alone for a while. A Dutch ship was nearby. Any harm to the Dutch could mean loss of innocent lives of the natives. Matara patiently waited for an opportunity. When the couple were leaving the land, he decided to follow them. Karain being a trusted ally and a close friend accompanied him. The pursuit lasted for two years, during which the two friends had to sell the gold cover of their scabbards, go without food and endure sickness and pain. Karain nursed his friend. If there was food for one, he offered it to him. But during their wanderings, he had fallen in love with the image of Matara's ravishing sister. He had almost come to believe in that image as a living entity.

At last, they found their intended victims. Matara decided to aim at his sister while he ordered Karain to shoot the Dutch. Karain could not let her die. At the crucial moment, he warns her to go back and fires at Matara. The bewildered Dutch thanks him profusely. Karain wakes up to the harsh reality as the girl fails even to recognise him. He pretends to be a stranger, who while passing by saw Matara aiming at them, so he killed him.

Karain refused their hospitality and took refuge in a cottage in a jungle nearby. He began to be haunted by Matara's ghost. It did not leave him even when he reached another land. he fought in the Atjeh war. People wandered at his valour. Karain believed that he was not alone in the war and Matara warded off the blows. Later, Karain became the village chief.

He could not share his fear and guilt with anyone till he met an old pilgrim. He became his confidant and consoled him. He prayed for him and finally gave him a charm to keep away Matara's spirit. The old man became his sword-bearer. After his death, Karain is again tormented by Matara's spirit.

He wants the Englishmen to take him to their land where he could find some peace. The men knew that the natives needed Karain. They try to persuade him to return, but in vain. Finally, Hollis, one of the whites, rummages in his and takes out a six pence coin. He assures Karain that the “spirit’ of the British “nation” represented by Queen Victoria, is quite powerful and beneficial. Karain accepts this charm and returns to his people.This does not mean, however, the wrong which Karain had committed had been righted; it only means he feels provided with a sure defence against suffering the consequences of his guilt.

Karain leads a dual life. During daytime, he is a respectable chief but at night he is a tormented, frightened sinner who had murdered his own friend. The narrative abounds in images from the illusory world of stage, and darkness and night symbolising the inner fear and hopelessness in Karain. It also shows appearances are deceptive.

Karain’s mental anguish is foregrounded in the images of darkness. He confesses: “I ran in the night. The water was black. I left him (the ghost) calling on the edge of black water.” (Conrad 43) He comes to the Whites desperately hoping to be saved. He believes that they are strong and their scientific, rational attitude would somehow keep the spirit away.

The story begins in a reminiscent mood and contrasts between past and present. The past is glorified and eulogised. The present air is foul; the past’s was exotic and perfumed. Today’s Englishmen are timid and “befogged”, while the natives are brave, faithful and frank. (Conrad 13-14)

The Eastern Archipelago, Karain’s land, is a bright, open, peaceful land contrasted with the foggy, industrialised, busy city of London. To the White sailors, used to the hustle and bustle of city life-the secluded, serene island hidden from the neighbouring lands by a arrange of mountains is a mystery, which is incomprehensible.

It was not until much later, with the advent of texts like Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, that the complicity of Romantic exoticism, with colonial attitudes was made explicit and fully

articulated. In keeping with the tendencies of his time, Conrad has the central Malay character, Karain, tell his story in a “noble savage” language, not very different from that of Arsat in “The Lagoon”.

The narrator’s presentation of the story-so benevolent and sympathetic on first appearances—gradually becomes suspect. His tendency to romanticise is brought into question, subtly at first, then more forcefully, and with it his reasons (and companions’ reasons) for being in that part of the world. The disquiet experienced by the reader is a reaction to both the unstable narratorial and the colonial positions adopted by the text.

The reasons why the narrator of “Karain” has come to Mindanao are not made clear until well into the tale. The three visitors have come to this remote corner of the Mindanao because they can “in comparative safety break the law against the traffic in firearms and ammunition with the natives.” (Conrad 16). No mention is made of any soul-searching or moral responsibility, only of the dangers of being caught in the act by roaming Spanish fighters. The tale presents the notion, though it is vehemently denied by the European characters, that perhaps Queen Victoria herself, had she known of this “bravura” would have endorsed it. After all, it is in keeping with the “greater adventures” of the colonial enterprise. It is Karain who believes the arms smuggling to be quietly backed by none other than the head of state herself: “I fancy emissaries of Government, darkly official persons furthering by our illegal traffic some dark scheme of high statecraft. Our denials and protestations were unavailing. He only smiled with discreet politeness and inquired about the Queen.” (Conrad 20). The shrewd but unsophisticated native protagonist may innocently prefer what the English characters would not permit themselves to think.

The lines quoted above serve as a reminder that the arms trafficking of the three Englishmen is illegal and clandestine, and they indicate the depth of Karain’s conviction that it is tacitly endorsed by officialdom. more often than not, illegal arms trading is quietly

sanctioned by governments. But Karain's belief that the Englishmen are really carrying out the wishes of their queen is represented as belonging to a stock of characteristically simplistic native assumptions and naïve misunderstandings concerning European "civilisation" in general, and England and its queen in particular.

In the context of post-colonial interpretation, however, the crony allows room for a very different reading whereby the "native" understands much more than the Europeans, and plays up to their naïve expectations. The text continues along those lines:

Every visit began with that inquiry… he could never know enough of the Monarch…the far-off Queen whom he called Great, Invincible, Pious and Fortunate. We had to invent details at last to satisfy his craving curiosity; and our loyalty must be pardoned, for we tried to make them fit for his august and resplendent ideal. (Conrad 20-21)

The narrator and his friends clearly "invent" much more than the details offered to satisfy Karain's view of the world they come from. This fiction devised for "native" consumption must be made to fit within the fiction of the "native" as the European sees him, the native who cannot grasp the reality of the West, a reality that proves itself by the end of the tale to be no less of a fiction.

The above is only one of numerous passages in which the reader's views of Karain is mediated by the narrator, who speaks as if he believes some form of cultural mediation is required of him. He must explain the local people to the British; the native Maly must be "palatable" to the Victorian reader and still a "native", and the narrator must be able to illustrate how he could, without scandal become Karain's close friend. This phrase recalls a similar sentiment in "The Lagoon", when the omniscient narrator drops the Romantic elaboration for a brief and ironic comment on the relationship between Arsat and the White man indicating that the latter "liked Arsat… not so much perhaps as a man likes his favourite dog…but still he liked him well enough to listen and ask no questions." (Conrad 177)

There is enough evidence in “Karain” to make it a colonial text but as Reynold Humphries aptly says it is “a text which *hesitates*, oscillating between an explicit racism and an apparent desire to put whites and non-whites on an equal footing.” (Carabine ed. 156). The narrator’s tone suggests the white’s superiority, sophistication and intelligence over the natives. Speaking of Karain, the narrator says “He summed up his race, his country, the elemental face of ardent life, of tropical nature. He had its luxuriant strength, its fascination; and like it, he carried the seed of peril within.” (Conrad 16)

Later, looking at Karain’s intense preparation, his narrator is awe-struck. To him these are essentially white attributes and he had imagined Karain to be “racially incapable” of such concerted effort. (Conrad 25). Also, the narrator gets the upper hand in his narrative. The readers get to know about Karain from him while he gets to speak about himself much later. (Only one-fifth of the total, and introduced much later after about the second half of the story). The narrator’s voice therefore, carries more weight and conviction. The reader’s picture of Karain and his land is filtered through the narrator’s consciousness.

The text tries to dispel doubts regarding the colonialist’s attitude to the native: “There are those who say that a native will not speak to a white man. Error. No man will speak to his master, but to wanderer and friend...” (Conrad 32). But one finds only Karain being able to converse with the Whites. No other native at any point in the story has any verbal exchange with them. After a few years when Jackson, one of the whites, asks the narrator if Karain’s story has been real. He is astounded that the former should be asking such a question at all. He feels Jackson had been away from home for too long to show an inclination towards illusions. In the final scene, the word “illusions” can be read in several possible ways, and not merely as the illusion of freedom from the Spanish colonial rule as indicated by phrases like

"He will make it hot for the caballeros." This remark highlights the influence of the Spanish colonial era. However, this is more than just a delusion on Karain’s part. By

associating Karain's memory with a gun shop, the text suggests that the narrator's own recollections are deceptive. It points to a flawed reconstruction of history where nostalgia is used to create an exoticized "Other." The narrator holds a position of privilege, rooted in the temporal present and the heart of the British Empire. This vantage point allows him to craft the story "Karain: A Memory" without challenge. In this context, memory functions as a form of "unreality"—a subjective recreation rather than a factual account. Such embellishments are readily accepted as long as they align with the period's standard ways of representing foreign cultures. It is ironic that Hollis uses a six pence coin as a charm for Karain. To the Whites, natives are foolish and gullible for believing in charms. What they don't realise is: "Whites need their fetish too, even if charms and potions tend to be replaced in Western capitalist society by that most powerful of fetishes: money." (Humphries 161).

To Conrad "Karain" was a prized piece of fiction for it was his first contribution to *Blackwood* and made him personally acquainted with William Blackwood, the magazine's editor whose advice and friensdship Conrad greatly valued. But he seemed to have had some reservations about the story as his letter to Cunnigham Graham shows: "I was afraid you would despise it. There's something magazine'ish about it. Eh?" (Graver 33).

Conrad began to write a serious tale of crime and guilt but gives it a ridiculous end instead of exploring its full implications. The multiple references to Queen and her nation can be explained by its date of composition. It was written just four months to the celebration of Queen Victoria's sixty years of sovereignty in mid-June 1897. The author hoped to benefit commercially from such an occasion. He did succeed for the common magazine readers found the theme and the pleasant end of the story appealing.

As stated earlier, the story serves as a landmark in the evolution of Conrad's narrative technique. He wrote to his publisher: "All my endeavours shall be directed to understand it

better, to develop its great possibilities to acquire greater skill in the handling—to mastery in short." (Conrad 34)

"The Lagoon", the last story in the volume *Tales of Unrest* is in fact the first short story Conrad ever wrote and in his own words, marks, "…in a manner of speaking, the end of my first phase with its special subject and its verbal suggestions." (Conrad 9)

"The Lagoon" was written especially to sell. When Conrad was asked by the editors of Cornhill to write something exotic, something more characteristic of him, he tried to recapture the topography of his Malayan novels- "forests, river-stars-wind-sunrise…and lots of second hand Conradese." (Graver 26).It is a beautiful story with its brisk narrative, the precise, pictorial writing, the setting of river and hidden lagoon. The language is suggestive, gleaming and stirring. The story:

An unnamed white man is paddled by some Malays to a narrow lagoon where a Malay friend lives in seclusion with his wife. The latter is dying and the Malay, Arsat, tells the story of how he carried off the girl from her people. Some years ago, Arsat had disclosed to his devoted brother that he was in love with Diamelen the ruler's wife's servant. The brother asks him to confess it to her and carry on with his courtship clandestinely. He instructs him to patiently wait for an opportunity to elope with her. the great moment comes when the Ruler and the other villagers go out fishing. The brothers quickly smuggle out along with the girl. Unfortunately, the trio is quickly discovered and overtaken by the ruler's guards.

Arsat's brother, who is extremely caring and courageous, understands that Arsat with his beloved is "only half a man now". It would be unwise for him to face his enemies just yet. So, he asks the couple to run while he would stop the enemies with his gun. He would join them when the powder finished. Arsat finds a boat, asks Diamelen to jump in off the canoe and takes the paddle himself. He does this while still listening to his brother's shout that he is coming Arsat reacts instinctively. He has beside him his beloved whom he has obtained with

great difficulty. He could not expose her afresh to the danger she has almost escaped. Between fraternal and conjugal love, he chose the latter. Perhaps the case is not as simple, for Arsat feels two men may in any case not suffice to face an army. Further delay would cost all their lives. He swiftly paddles away canoe leaving his brother to be caught and killed by the enemies.

When the story finishes, Arsat notices that his wife has passed away. The white man offers his condolence and proposes to take Arsat to his land. But Arsat has other plans. Now that his wife is dead, he would go back to avenge his brother's death. However, that seems to be of little help since the gnawing sense of betrayal and leaving behind his brother to be hunted down by the guards have taken their toll.

In fact, what Arsat did by paddling his beloved away to safety was more in the nature of a reflex action, an instinctive and almost automatic response toa a threatening situation. Betrayal (or infidelity) is a recurring trope in Conrad's fiction, a category that enables him to probe the human mind and behaviour. The entire story hinges on this growing sense of Arsat's "betrayal" of his brother in a moment of mortal danger.

Interestingly, betrayal involves some plan, some premeditation. On the contrary, what Arsat has committed is an act of survival in a moment of danger, true to Conrad's remark that men act without thought. The "thought" on what Arsat had done years ago comes to the reader only through its replay at a turning point—the death of the person whose love had made Arsat forget the love of his brother.

The concept of fidelity in Conrad is quite complex. Fidelity to one cause often involves infidelity to another. In his personal case fidelity to Britain, his adopted homeland, involved infidelity to Poland, his ancestral motherland. Arsat's fidelity to his ladylove involves infidelity to his brother. That is the human predicament of trying to live a moral life and failing in that attempt. It generates a great tension. Strain between conflicting loyalties gives a certain existential poignancy to his characters. Conrad recognises the antagonisms involved in life:

"The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the reconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous—so full of hope." (Watts xiv).

"The Lagoon" is an open- ended story where some critics have read the possibility of redemption while others have rubbed it out on the basis of internal evidence and Conrad's own changes in the story for the book edition. The conclusion in the Cornhill magazine reads: "he was still looking through the great light of a cloudless day into the darkness of the world." (Conrad 26) However, in the book the closing lines read: "he looked beyond the great light of a cloudless day into the darkness of the world of illusion." (Conrad 26). In all likelihood, Conrad revised the magazine version of the story in order to strengthen the dramatic unity of the five stories in *Tales of Unrest*, for the idea of destructive dreams is central to four of the five pieces, and in the fifth, "Karain', a trick ending turns defeat into an unconvincing triumph.

The contrast between reality and illusion, the human tendency to blur the distinction, the moral haziness arising from it result in restlessness. Hence, the collection is *Tales of Unrest*. The common element is the illusory nature of life itself.

The two claims to Arsat's love, one of which was so tragically superseded by the other, are for the last time juxtaposed, when he is made to declare that he did love his brother but was ready to pay even that price for a satisfaction of his other longing: "I wanted peace in my own heart." (Conrad184)—obviously unobtainable in this way.

The rising of the sun can be taken as a symbol for the process of life resuming its course. The soaring white eagle in the reappearing sunlight is a delicate echo of the traditional moments of hagiographical tales when souls flutter away to the sky in the shape of birds.

The lagoon is now fully cleared having provided the frame in which a story of human fascination, stumbling and suffering could be enacted. When Arsat finishes his narration, a breeze comes up and landscapes comes to life, suggesting the possibilities of redemption.

Admittedly, there are several carefully composed contrasts to the deadly stillness of Arsat's surroundings: The natives think of him living among actively malevolent ghosts, while the white man fears that the country wears a "mask of unjustifiable violence" (Conrad 176) Moreover at the story's close, the sun rises, the "whisper of unconscious life" (Conrad 185) grows louder, and a white eagle soars magnificently into the blue sky. But this is an ironic contrast for, Arsat is left standing paralysed, looking beyond the light and into a dark world of illusion. The way in which the light and dark motif works in "The Lagoon" (the rising sun illumines reality, while the darkness fosters illusion) suggests that, though Arsat achieves a degree of relief by telling his story to the white man, he is merely substituting one illusion for another (even if he goes back to avenge his brother, and this, in context , is uncertain), the return will be in no sense triumphant. The word "return" occurs at critical moments in every story in *Tales of Unrest* and in four of the five cases no return, physical or metaphorical is possible. Kayerts and Carlier are defeated by innate stupidity, and Arsat by a defective moral sense.

While the setting serves as the central figure in "The Lagoon," another important character plays a key role in revealing the evolution of Conrad's narrative style. The white man, who silently listens to Arsat's story and seems to represent a detached moral perspective, can be seen as an early version of Marlow. For much of the story, however, he functions simply as an observing consciousness—a set of eyes that registers and conveys the physical surroundings. Conrad's language reinforces this through repeated phrases like "he looked," "he gazed," and "he saw," while the character offers no substantial interpretation of the events he witnesses.

Conclusion

Though fidelity and betrayal are recurring motifs in Conrad's oeuvre, tasking an exclusive biographical approach to it would be crudely reductive as biographical criticism has

been shown to standing on an infirm ground[2]. What counts here is the deftly constructed warp and woof of the stories discussed, the well-honed craft of storytelling that so convincingly narrates the existential dilemmas without necessary being judgmental. In a way that is the quintessential Joseph Conrad. Future research could further explore the intersection of colonial discourse and moral philosophy in Conrad's broader body of work, as well as comparative studies with other colonial-era literature.

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[2] In an illuminating essay Najder writes that the motif of betrayal and guilt are abundant in Polish Literature since Poland lost its independence in nineteenth century. Among the several examples he quotes are, Adam Mickiewiz, the great Polish poet who wrote: "Woe to us, who fled at the time of the plague…I have no dignity-I have fled from martyrdom." Thus, what appears to be typical Conradian obsession, apparently arising from his personal life turns out to be a national stereotype. See Najder, "Conrad's Polish Background, or, From Biography to a study of Culture," *Conrad: Critical Assessments, ed. Keith Carabine, vol. 2, 103–108.*

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