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# The White Men in Borneo: Joseph Conrad's Earlier Malay Fiction

Kazuhisa Fujiyama

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was born and brought up in Poland, and then became naturalized in Britain in 1886. Since he lost his parents as a child, he was raised by his uncle. After that, he left Poland and made a living as a seaman, voyaging around the world until he was in his late thirties. In 1886, he passed the examination for "a master's certificate,"<sup>1</sup> yet the writing and publication of his first novel *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and his second novel *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) made him ultimately quit his career in the merchant navy. The protagonists of these earlier works, which are based on Conrad's experiences in the East, are white men living in the Malay world. In this paper, I will discuss how Conrad represents these characters by referring mainly to the author's biography and the historical or cultural context of the era in which these texts were written.

## (1) Almayer's Dream

Kasper Almayer, the protagonist of *Almayer's Folly*,<sup>2</sup> is a Dutchman who settles down at Sambir (an imaginary place), a Malay village in Borneo, and is engaged in trading as an agent. Moreover, he is the only white man living there. Some twenty years earlier, he landed "from the Dutch mail-boat on the dusty jetty of Macassar, coming to woo fortune in the godowns of old Hudig"(5). Young Almayer, "ready to conquer the world"(5), was filled with confidence. What needs to be emphasized about his character is that he is a dreamer. Ian Watt states: "Almayer is a Borneo Bovary. Like Emma, he devotes his entire life to one obsessive fantasy—though not of great love but of great wealth."<sup>3</sup>

The novel begins with the depiction of Almayer "leaning with both his elbows on the balustrade of the verandah"(3) of his house and dreaming of large amounts of gold:

Almayer's thoughts were often busy with gold; gold he had failed to secure; gold the others had secured—dishonestly, of course—or gold he meant to secure yet, through his own honest exertions, for himself and Nina. He absorbed himself in his dream of wealth and power away from this coast where he had dwelt for so many years, forgetting the bitterness of toil and strife in the vision of a great and splendid reward. They would live in Europe, he and his daughter. They would be rich and respected. Nobody would think of her mixed blood in the presence of her great beauty and of his immense wealth. (3)

It is clear that Almayer escapes into his imagination from a reality which is disgusting to him, and is obsessed by the vision of making fortune and then living in Europe with his daughter Nina. His mind is always occupied with Europe, where he wishes to be respected by people. As Robert Hampson notes, "For Almayer, Sambir is only a stepping stone towards Europe."<sup>4</sup> Rolf Hjertaas Charlston also takes a similar view: "Staring in reverie at the Pantai River, he [Almayer] longs for the escape he could achieve if he could only work up determination."<sup>5</sup> To him Europe appears to be a sort of paradise as well as his roots; therefore, he consciously presumes that Europe is superior to the Malay world where he lives now. Almayer cannot find a way to live a peaceful and happy life in the Malay world.

Almayer's habit of dreaming, which is frequently described in the course of the story, shows markedly that he does not accept the reality of the outward world, but withdraws into his own internal world.<sup>6</sup> He pins all his hopes on the quest for a gold mine because his business has not been successful since the Arabs have come to dominate the market. What is more, his

beloved daughter Nina falls in love with Dain, who belongs to the tribes of Bali, and leaves Sambir with him. In short, Almayer's dream of settling in Europe along with Nina is completely shattered. In consequence, he tries to forget his afflictions by smoking opium, but he becomes addicted and finally dies.

*Almayer's Folly*, to be sure, "is at once a love story, a novel of adventure, and an exercise in exoticism,"<sup>7</sup> as Norman Page remarks. However, it can be said that, as we have seen, one of the subject matters of this novel is the protagonist's dream and final defeat. It seems to arouse sympathy from many readers that although he has dreams and hopes, his whole attempt is eventually frustrated. A question now arises: In what way does Conrad want the reader to perceive Almayer?

In his autobiographical work *A Personal Record*, Conrad looks back upon his childhood, when he lived in his homeland Poland, and expresses in parallel with those memories a sense of accomplishment at finishing his first novel. In this autobiography, Conrad refers to his grand-uncle in an episode of his bitter experiences in Poland:

The devouring in a dismal forest of a luckless Lithuanian dog by my grand-uncle Nicholas B. in company of two other military and famished scarecrows, symbolized, to my childish imagination, the whole horror of the retreat from Moscow, and the immorality of a conqueror's ambition. An extreme distaste for that objectionable episode has tinged the views I hold as to the character and achievements of Napoleon the Great. I need not say that these are unfavourable. It was morally reprehensible for that great captain to induce a simple-minded Polish gentleman to eat dog by raising in his breast a false hope of national independence. It has been the fate of that credulous nation to starve for upward of a hundred years on a diet of false hopes and—well—dog.<sup>8</sup>

We can vividly see that Conrad and the Polish people were placed in a position of considerable difficulty when he was a child. His reminiscence above suggests that Conrad is attracted by the theme of failed dreams as developed in the character of Almayer because his

memories of life in Poland are marked by similar failures, as Yoshio Teruya points out.<sup>9</sup> The phrase "raising in his breast a false hope of national independence" especially reminds us of Almayer's unfulfilled dream. Almayer seems to Conrad to be a character who symbolizes Poland or the Polish people. Watt also mentions that Conrad "had presumably recognized behind Almayer's ludicrous public aspect an extreme version of his own personal alternations between grandiose romantic dreams and a tired inurement to defeat."<sup>10</sup>

As is generally known, Poland was completely dismembered and divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria from the late eighteenth to the nineteenth century. That is to say, Poland had not been an independent nation for more than a hundred years. In his short story "Prince Roman" (1910), Conrad refers to Polish nationality as follows: "that nationality not so much alive as surviving, which persists in thinking, breathing, speaking, hoping, and suffering in its grave, railed in by a million of bayonets and triple-sealed with the seals of three great empires."<sup>11</sup> For this reason, some people demonstrated for the liberation of the Poles from foreign rule. Under such circumstances, Conrad's father, Apollo Nalecz Korzeniowski, also expressed "[h]is passionate and patriotic allegiance to Poland,"<sup>12</sup> and devoted himself to political activity. As a result, he was arrested and sent into exile in Russia, and to make matters worse, he passed away months later because of consumption. Apollo, whose dream of Polish liberation has not come true during his lifetime, seems to be similar to Almayer in a sense. In this respect, it is possible that Conrad directs his Polish eyes to Almayer, and that his attitude toward Almayer reveals a certain sympathy for the misfortune of his protagonist.<sup>13</sup>

To sum up, it is quite likely that Conrad's attitude toward Almayer reflects the state of affairs in Poland at the time. Thus, the author's view of Almayer is rather sympathetic, which probably derives from the similarity between Almayer's circumstances in Borneo and those of Conrad in his country. Conrad reveals in *A Personal Record* that "if I had not got to know Almayer pretty well it is almost certain there would never have been a line of mine in print."<sup>14</sup> This passage clearly shows that Almayer's actual character made a strong impression on the sailor Conrad, and led him into taking up his pen. It can be said, in this sense, that

Conrad's experiences in the Malay world are one of the important sources of the earlier works, and in addition directly reminded him of his experiences of his homeland.

## (2) Nina's Role

Here, let us turn our attention to Conrad's critical standpoint toward Almayer. On the one hand, Conrad takes a sympathetic attitude to Almayer, as discussed above; on the other hand, he seems to criticize Almayer's claim to be a civilized man.

Nina, who is Almayer's "half-caste"(16) daughter, plays an important role in the formulation of Conrad's critique. She begins to feel fascinated by the story of her Malay mother, while gradually developing a strong antipathy toward the white society, which her father Almayer belongs to:

To her resolute nature, however, after all these years, the savage and uncompromising sincerity of purpose shown by her Malay kinsmen seemed at last preferable to the sleek hypocrisy, to the polite disguises, to the virtuous pretences of such white people as she had had the misfortune to come in contact with. After all it was her life; it was going to be her life, and so thinking she fell more and more under the influence of her mother. (43)

It is obvious that Nina conceives of the civilized white people as full of "sleek hypocrisy," "polite disguises" and "virtuous pretences," and condemns them. Where does Nina's reproach against the civilized men come from?

Nina received an education in the white society of Singapore when she was a child, but "the education ended in a scene of humiliation, in an outburst of contempt from white people for her mixed blood"(42). That is, the white children's or adults' bullying to which Nina was subjected in her childhood arises from a racial difference, and finally leads her into criticizing civilized white people. To her, as a result, white men seem to conceal their depravity under "the narrow mantle of civilized morality"(42). Besides, she senses that the fights and scuffles of wild and valiant men of Malay tribes are morally superior to the devious means of

white people: "the atmosphere of sordid plottings for gain, of the no less disgusting intrigues and crimes for lust or money"(42).

Needless to say, Nina's father, Kasper Almayer, is included among the white people whom she denounces as hypocrites. The following passage is what Nina says to her father in the parting scene, and offers the key to understanding why she cannot accept her father:

"Between you and my mother there never was any love. When I returned to Sambir I found the place which I thought would be a peaceful refuge for my heart, filled with weariness and hatred—and mutual contempt. I have listened to your voice and to her voice. Then I saw that you could not understand me; for was I not part of that woman? Of her who was the regret and shame of your life? I had to choose—I hesitated. Why were you so blind? Did you not see me struggling before your eyes? But, when he [Dain] came, all doubt disappeared, and I saw only the light of the blue and cloudless heaven—" (191)

From this quotation, we can see that Nina is aware of the lack of conjugal affection between Mr. and Mrs. Almayer.<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Almayer is Tom Lingard's adopted daughter, a Malay woman. Lingard has suggested that Almayer should marry her, and Almayer has accepted; yet, his real intention of marriage is for Lingard's money, and thereby he attempts to migrate from Borneo to Europe with Nina. It is thus clear that there is no affection between Almayer and Lingard's Malay daughter. On the contrary, he has a racial prejudice against his wife:

As to the other side of the picture—the companionship for life of a Malay girl, that legacy of a boatful of pirate—there was only within him a confused consciousness of shame that he a white man— Still, a convent education of four years!—and then she may mercifully die. He was always lucky, and money is powerful! Go through it. Why not? He had a vague idea of shutting her up somewhere, anywhere, out of his gorgeous future. Easy enough to dispose

of a Malay woman, a slave, after all, to his Eastern mind, convent or no convent, ceremony or no ceremony. (10-11)

It is plain that Almayer is concerned about the racial difference between himself and his wife, and feels a sort of sense of superiority as a white man. This sense is probably based on, to use Said's terms, "the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient."<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, Almayer does not establish, as it were, a commensurate relationship with his wife, but instead, inwardly despises her as "a slave."

It is probable that Nina sees through the hypocritical and fraudulent behavior of her father, which lies at the bottom of the lack of affection between her parents; and so she can never agree to Almayer's dream of living in Europe with her. For this reason, as mentioned before, she chooses to live not with Almayer but with her lover Dain, who gives her "life that means power and love"(191). Consequently, Nina decides to open up herself to the Malay people, such as her mother and Dain, and to reject white men, her father included.

This resolution of Nina requires some further consideration. In this connection, Robert Hampson has commented:

Nina's problems are not those of an elevated self-ideal. Her problems are more obviously social problems: the problem of having to align herself with one of two opposed groups, when she belongs equally to each. Nina is in the situation where she is forced to betray a group to which she partly belongs for another to which she also partly belongs—and hence to betray part of herself.<sup>17</sup>

Hampson deals with Nina's problems from the viewpoint of betrayal. In fact, Nina uses the Malay language, not the European languages, such as English and Dutch, when, for instance, she talks to her parents. It is true that Nina has established her identity as a member of the Malay, but we must not forget that she has betrayed "part of herself," namely her white, European side. This point is likely to remind us of Conrad's own betrayal, specifically his act of leaving his country Poland, and then becoming naturalized in Britain. The

figure of Nina seems to correspond with that of Conrad to some extent. It is especially noteworthy that Nina is born in Borneo, Dutch territory, and then gets an education in the civilized world in Singapore; similarly, Conrad was brought up in Poland dominated by Russia, and afterwards he was incorporated as a member of British society. It may be worth mentioning that betrayal is, in fact, probably one of the most important themes in his fiction.<sup>18</sup>

So far, we have seen that the author's attitude toward Almayer is somewhat ambivalent because he both seems to sympathize with his character while also adopting a critical stance toward Western civilization as can be seen in Nina's discourse. The skeptical attitude toward civilization that the female character Nina assumes, furthermore, is more emphatically shown by the narrator Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which Conrad uses a technique of frame-narrative.

### (3) The Contemporary Adventure Tradition

For a better understanding of the remarkable features of the characters discussed so far, it may be useful to examine Conrad's Malay fiction in relation to the tradition of the contemporary adventure novels. Adventure fiction typically involves a white male character coping with a host of difficulties in a foreign country or island before finally attaining success and prosperity. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) is one typical example. The boy, Jim Hawkins, with a manuscript map of a treasure island, obtains a great treasure after thrilling fights and adventures.<sup>19</sup> The formation and popularity of adventure fiction have a close relation to British thought and ethos in the nineteenth century, namely what Andrea White calls "the imperial subject."<sup>20</sup>

In Conrad's Malay fiction, however, the protagonists, such as Almayer, Willems and Jim, although they have their own ideals or dreams, destroy their lives and all their hopes in the end. A question now arises: Why does the author choose the protagonists' failure and ruin as a motif in his earlier Malay fiction, without following the traditional model of adventure stories? White casts light on this issue by exploring "the ways in which nineteenth-century adventure fiction reinscribed the imperial subject already constructed by the

currently popular travel writing; the great power of both genres on several generations of British readers; and Conrad's subsequent demythologizing of that subject in his early fiction, thus providing a different, more illuminating context for the early works."<sup>21</sup>

We should, here, remind ourselves of Nina's utterance in *Almayer's Folly*. She plays a role in criticizing civilized people's hypocrisy, as discussed before. It is worthy of remark that the Malay women, such as Nina, Mrs. Almayer and Aïssa, who belong to the so-called non-Western world, have the function of speaking independently in the novels. From an Orientalist standpoint, it is the West that has the authority to represent itself; on the other hand, the East is forced to become "the weak that cannot have a power to express itself, or cannot be listened to it even if it narrates,"<sup>22</sup> that is, the object which is always silent.

In this respect, Conrad's earlier works, in which the Malay women (the East) are given the right to insist on their own ideas, diverge from adventure fiction which centers on white men. Conrad also must have been "a peripheral being, deprived of an essential centre,"<sup>23</sup> as Amar Acheraiou suggests, in view of Conrad's background and situation, for his country Poland was not independent, and moreover he lost his parents. Tsuneo Masaki points out that Conrad's experiences in Poland served to strengthen his innate sympathy toward those who are in a state of being oppressed.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Conrad can direct a spotlight on to such characters as Nina and Mrs. Almayer. That is, one of the reasons why his earlier works do not continue a traditional style of adventure fiction is that Conrad tries to provide "a different, more illuminating context for the early works" by defending the Eastern or Malay side.

Additionally, there seems to be another reason for it. Ian Watt refers to memories, models and problems of *Almayer's Folly*, and comments that "Conrad also seems to have followed the historical facts in a good many minor details."<sup>25</sup> Watt, furthermore, analyzes the causes of Almayer's failure and defeat in historical context, and aptly sums them up as follows:

The dreams of Almayer had really been foreclosed, not by a betrayed secret, but by history. The Malay archipelago had seen two

generations of heroic individual achievement: that of Sir Stamford Raffles (1781-1826), founder of Singapore; then that of Sir James Brooke (1803-1868), who became the rajah of Sarawak. Later, some of their merchant-adventurer successors in the fifties and sixties, such as William Lingard, had at least become figures of legend; but as Western penetration developed, individual opportunities declined, and the merchants and sailors of the seventies and eighties, the generation of Olmeijer [the model of Almayer], were a much more humdrum group. Even Borneo, one of the last areas to be taken over by the colonial powers, had now been largely consolidated; the long series of Dutch local wars ended in 1886; and in 1888 Sarawak officially became a British protectorate.<sup>26</sup>

The nineteenth-century Malay world, in which this novel is set, was under Western colonial rule. As a consequence, unlike the former generations, Almayer has no option but to live as a member of "a much more humdrum group," because it has become more difficult to be a "heroic individual." In other words, the expansion of national power seems to make it more difficult for individuals to take their own heroic actions. It can be said, therefore, that the historical context in the late nineteenth century is also an important element in Conrad's subversion of the adventure tradition in his earlier works.

#### (4) Willems' Isolation

Conrad's second novel *An Outcast of the Islands*<sup>27</sup> can basically be read as a sequel to *Almayer's Folly*, and the action takes place "some fifteen years before that of *Almayer's Folly*."<sup>28</sup> The protagonist is Peter Willems, a thirty-year-old Dutchman who "came east fourteen years ago—a cabin boy"(7). He has been trusted by Tom Lingard and joined Hudig's trading company:

He [Willems] wrote a beautiful hand, became soon perfect in English, was quick at figure; and Lingard made him useful in that way. As

he grew older his trading instincts developed themselves astonishingly, and Lingard left him often to trade in one island or another while he, himself, made an intermediate trip to some out-of-the-way place. (17)

It is suggested that Willems is of great capacity and has a bright future. Later on, he manages to accomplish “the quiet deal in opium; the illegal traffic in gunpowder; the great affair of smuggled firearms”(8); and so he “believed in his genius and in his knowledge of the world”(6). Willems has all the time been confident that “the road to greatness lay plainly before his eyes, straight and shining, without any obstacle that he could see”(11).

A turning point in his life, however, then occurs. Willems, who himself has been proud of his ability and dreamed of his success, specifically becoming “Hudig’s [his employer’s] future partner,” “had appropriated temporarily some of Hudig’s money”(11). The following opening passage in the novel shows clearly what he himself thinks of his stealing money from the company:

When he stepped off the straight and narrow path of his peculiar honesty, it was with an inward assertion of unflinching resolve to fall back again into the monotonous but safe stride of virtue as soon as his little excursion into the wayside quagmires had produced the desired effect. It was going to be a short episode—a sentence in brackets, so to speak—in the flowing tale of his life: a thing of no moment, to be done unwillingly, yet neatly, and to be quickly forgotten. (3)

Like *Almayer*, as Tetsuo Yoshida explains, Willems indulges in a flight of fancy.<sup>29</sup> The first line “stepped off the straight and narrow path of his peculiar honesty” specifically refers to Willems’ action of appropriation. From this passage, we can see that for him such an action is of no great consequence if only he pays back off secretly the money he has stolen. But then, as his deed comes out into the open, he is dismissed from his job. Moreover, he is treated coldly by his wife, rushes out from his house, wanders around in solitude, and attempts to commit suicide. Under such circumstances

he practically becomes “the outcast of all mankind”(30).

As indicated above, it can be said that one of the themes of the novel is the problem of the protagonist’s isolation. Frederick R. Karl indicates that “[Willems is] doomed as a human being, cut off from civilization and civilized feeling.”<sup>30</sup> Robert Hampson comments, “Willems is the prototype of those Conrad heroes who betray an ideal conception of self and ‘spoil’ their lives.”<sup>31</sup> This prototype also corresponds to the figure of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, who has high ideals and firm beliefs in the civilized world, but completely loses them in Africa. Moreover, both Willems and Kurtz are depicted as isolated beings that live in a world remote from civilized society.

As for the outcast figure, the so-called “pariah,” such as Willems and Kurtz, Acheraiou makes an apt remark:

The pariah . . . refers not only to the exile Conrad, who left his country and became alien to his roots, but also to the Poles who remained at home but were estranged from their own country. In both cases the pariah embodies a peripheral being, deprived of an essential center.<sup>32</sup>

What the passage makes clear is that Conrad with his Polish perspective can see through to the essence of characters like Willems (or *Almayer*). If Conrad himself cannot share a sense of belonging to Britain, where he became naturalized, and is as good as “an outcast,” then his state of mind is more or less parallel with that of Willems. But, at the same time, more noteworthy is that his view of Willems reflects both Conrad’s personal feelings as an “exile” and the state of affairs in Poland, which had been divided by three countries and could not have gained independence in those days.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that Conrad hardly makes reference to Poland and the Polish people in his earlier novels or other works. (He merely mentions them in some of his essays.) Wiesław Krajka has stated:

Omission of explicit references to Poland functioned for Conrad as an expression of the stagnation and hopelessness of his country’s political position, and as a repression of his

painful and undesirable feelings about his first homeland—perhaps he intended to preserve intact the anguishing memory of his enslaved country and mourn in secret its loss, or perhaps the tragedy was too agonizing to be put into words.<sup>33</sup>

It is not certain that Conrad intentionally avoids touching upon Poland in his novels, but lack of references to Poland, as Krajka suggests, probably results from Conrad's despair about his homeland and its repression. Indeed, "the present, undesired, Russian-dominated Poland becomes a painful blank,"<sup>34</sup> but, at the same time, there ought to be "a movement and a voice behind the draperies of fiction,"<sup>35</sup> as Conrad himself confesses in *A Personal Record*. That is, it can be said that Conrad's yearning for his country and his Polish perspective naturally arises through the description of Almayer and Willems in his fiction all the more because he tries to get rid of painful remembrances of his childhood. Those whom Conrad had seen in the Malay world must have reminded him of his distant homeland Poland.

Here, let us now return to the discussion of Willems' character in *An Outcast of the Islands*. Owing to Tom Lingard's assistance, afterwards, Willems, who attempted to commit suicide, settles down at Sambir, which is also the setting of *Almayer's Folly*. While taking a walk, Willems runs across Aïssa, a Malay girl, and immediately becomes deeply fascinated by her beauty: "Willems stared at her, charmed with a charm that carries with it a sense of irreparable loss, tingling with that feeling which begins like a caress and ends in a blow, in that sudden hurt of a new emotion making its way into a human heart, with the brusque stirring of sleeping sensations awakening suddenly to the rush of new hopes, new fears, new desires—and to the flight of one's old self"(69). Growing conscious that Willems is one of the white men who earlier conquered her race, Aïssa feels a sense of terror toward him at first. But, as she frequently meets Willems secretly, her fear changes into the assurance of love (75-76). This point is important, for she can rid herself of the prejudices that generally underlie the relationship between the sovereign and the subject; that is, she transcends the context of racial difference. It is no exaggeration to say that she regards love as supreme: "She, a woman, was the

victim of her heart, of her woman's belief that there is nothing in the world but love—the everlasting thing" (334).

But then, like Almayer, Willems cannot completely shed his pride of being a civilized white man, although he once felt a strong passion for Aïssa. At this point, he cannot help but conceive a racial prejudice toward her:

He, a white man whose worst fault till then had been a little want of judgment and too much confidence in the rectitude of his kind! That woman was a complete savage, and . . . . He tried to tell himself that the thing was of no consequence. It was a vain effort. The novelty of the sensations he had never experienced before in the slightest degree, yet had despised on hearsay from his safe position of a civilized man, destroyed his courage. He was disappointed with himself. He seemed to be surrendering to a wild creature the unstained purity of his life, of his race, of his civilization. (80)

By looking down on Aïssa as "a complete savage" and continuing to believe in white supremacy, Willems experiences a "sense of certain defeat"(80) for having sexual intercourse with her, and is in anguish about this. Incidentally, like Willems and Aïssa, Yanko and his wife Amy in Conrad's novella "Amy Foster" (1901) are also unable to build a lasting relationship because of racial and linguistic differences. It can be said that such biased reason, vanity or conceit of human beings, as can be seen in Willems' feeling, blocks a recovery of more basic human instinct.

Regarding "the sense of certain defeat" Willems feels about Aïssa, there is another interesting aspect. Said, in *Orientalism*, refers to the relationship between Gustave Flaubert and an Egyptian courtesan, and suggests that "the pattern of relative strength between East and West"<sup>36</sup> has been formed by the structure of Western men's control over Eastern women. We can see a similar structure in the field of sexuality also, as Said stresses: "the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe."<sup>37</sup> Perhaps it is also true to some extent that "the white man who hopes to achieve an uninhibited erotic experience in the embrace of an exotic half-caste may



find in her the same mother or sister from whom he is ostensibly fleeing,"<sup>38</sup> as Bernard C. Meyer observes from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. Yet, in the case of the sexual relationship between Aïssa and Willems, it is the former who ultimately gives a feeling of oppression to the latter. Here, Orientalist structure, in which Western man is supposed to be dominant, seems to be reversed.

From the description of Aïssa, as well as of Nina in *Almayer's Folly*, we can notice a significance in the female characters' behavior.<sup>39</sup> Ruth Nadelhaft, in this connection, states, "Women, frequently half-breeds, represent the clearest means of challenging and revealing Western male insularity and domination,"<sup>40</sup> and goes on to say:

These early women are neither inarticulate nor unaware of the critical value of their lives and their perceptions set against white men and white society. Their comments are lucid and important.<sup>41</sup>

It is true that, to take their beliefs and behavior into account, Malay women, such as Nina and Aïssa, are wise and sensible in a certain sense. Their comments evince their doubt about white supremacy or colonialism, as embodied by Almayer and Willems. "Rather than the native's reputed moral inferiority, it is European civilization that Nina condemns for its narrowness, moral emptiness, racial exclusivity, and lack of vigour,"<sup>42</sup> as Andrea White observes. Besides, Yumiko Matsukata also asserts that the Malay women are important characters, who are powerful and strong.<sup>43</sup>

To sum up what has been discussed thus far, it seems reasonable to conclude that, as the example of Willems vividly demonstrates, to cling to the belief in racial superiority is in fact insignificant, and that it is nothing more than simply gloss or trappings. From the description of Willems, furthermore, we can see that the weakness and fragility of human beings are revealed when they are deprived of the mask of civilization. Through the relationship between Willems and Aïssa in *An Outcast of the Islands*, the author probably wants to emphasize the "folly" of civilized men who are filled with "the sleek hypocrisy" that Nina exposes in *Almayer's Folly*.

## Conclusion

The setting of Conrad's earlier two novels is in the Malay world of the late nineteenth century. In this paper, I have argued that the description of Almayer and Willems seems to reveal Conrad's complex and conflicting attitudes toward his two protagonists. On the one hand, the author is sympathetic toward his protagonists; on the other hand, he adopts a critical attitude, which derives from his situation as an outsider in British society. With regard to Conrad's critical view of civilization, White explains it to the point that "Conrad's first two novels question one of the central professions of imperialism, that European civilization was superior and could illuminate the earth's dark places."<sup>44</sup> This critical stance, already evident in the earlier Malay fiction, is further developed in *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow and Kurtz are used by Conrad to indict civilized white men by successfully disclosing their hypocrisy and deceit.

## Notes

1. Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (London: Weidenfeld, 1993), p. 83.
2. All quotations from *Almayer's Folly* are taken from the volume in *The Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1961). Page numbers are indicated in parentheses following each cited passage.
3. Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 51.
4. Robert Hampson, *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 105.
5. Rolf Hjertaas Charlston, *The Role of Place in Joseph Conrad's Fiction of the Malay Archipelago and the Congo* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1978), pp. 9-10.
6. See for example, Ian Watt, *Essays on Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 45-46.
7. Norman Page, *A Conrad Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 70.
8. Conrad, *A Personal Record* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1960), p. 46.

9. Yoshio Teruya, *Conrad no Shosetsu* [Conrad's Novels] (Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 1990), p. 3.
10. Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 36.
11. Conrad, "Prince Roman," *Tales of Hearsay* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1963), p. 29.
12. Norman Sherry, *Conrad and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 8.
13. Useful information on the connections between Conrad and Poland is given by the following collection of essays: Alex S. Kurczaba, ed., *Conrad and Poland* (Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, 1996).
14. Conrad, *A Personal Record*, p. 87.
15. Such a chasm between a married couple also reminds us of Mr. and Mrs. Verloc (Adolf and Winnie) in Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* (1907); at the climax, she stabs him with a carving knife.
16. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 7.
17. Robert Hampson, *Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity* (Basingstoke: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 30-31.
18. In Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* (1911), for instance, the protagonist Razumov speculates about betrayal when he plots to denounce his comrade Haldin, who is a revolutionist in St. Petersburg, to Prince K—.
19. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 1005.
20. Andrea White, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition: Constructing and Deconstructing the Imperial Subject* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 7.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
22. Tetsuya Motohashi, *Posuto-Koroniarizumu* [Post-Colonialism] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), p. 112.
23. Amar Acheraïou, "The Shadow of Poland," Wiesław Krajka, ed., *A Return to the Roots: Conrad, Poland and East-Central Europe* (Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, 2004), p. 59.
24. Tsuneo Masaki, *Shokuminchi Genso* [The Illusion of Colonies] (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobo, 1995), p. 207.
25. Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 37.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
27. All quotations from *An Outcast of the Islands* are taken from the volume in *The Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1967). Page numbers are indicated in parentheses following each cited passage.
28. Owen Knowles & Gene M. Moore, *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 297.
29. Tetsuo Yoshida, *Joseph Conrad no Sekai: Tsubasa no Oreta Tori* [Joseph Conrad's World: A Bird with a Broken Wing] (Tokyo: Kaibunsha Shuppan, 2005), p. 38.
30. Frederick R. Karl, *A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 101.
31. Robert Hampson, *Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity*, p. 32.
32. Acheraïou, p. 59.
33. Wiesław Krajka, ed., *A Return to the Roots: Conrad, Poland and East-Central Europe* (Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, 2004), p. 7.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
35. Conrad, *A Personal Record*, p. xiii.
36. Said, p. 6.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
38. Bernard C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 113.
39. For a discussion of Conrad's description of women or the relationship between him and them, see Susan Jones, *Conrad and Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 5-68.
40. Ruth Nadelhaft, "Women as Moral and Political Alternatives," Harold Bloom, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 151.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
42. Andrea White, "Conrad and Imperialism," J. H. Stape, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 189.
43. Yumiko Matsukata, *Conrad no Shosetsu niokeru Joseizo* [The Image of Women in Conrad's Novels] (Tokyo: Kindai Bungeisha, 1999), p. 29.
44. White, "Conrad and Imperialism," p. 189.

## The White Men in Borneo: Joseph Conrad's Earlier Malay Fiction

Kazuhisa Fujiyama

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was born and brought up in Poland, and then became naturalized in Britain in 1886. Since he lost his parents as a child, he was raised by his uncle. After that, he left Poland and made a living as a seaman, voyaging around the world until he was in his late thirties. In 1886, he passed the examination for a master's certificate, yet the writing and publication of his first novel *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and his second novel *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) made him ultimately quit his career in the merchant navy. The protagonists of these earlier works, which are based on Conrad's experiences in the East, are white men living in the Malay world.

This paper discusses how Conrad represents such protagonists as Almayer and Willems by referring mainly to the author's biography and the historical or cultural context of the era in which these texts were written. Through the description of these characters, Conrad seems to reveal his complex and conflicting attitudes toward them. One is the sympathetic Polish viewpoint, which reflects both Conrad's feelings as an exile and the state of affairs in Poland. The other is the critical viewpoint, which derives from his situation as an outsider in British society. This critical stance, which is especially shown by Malay women, such as Nina and Aïssa in Conrad's first two novels, is further developed in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), where Marlow and Kurtz are used by Conrad to indict civilized white men by successfully disclosing their hypocrisy and deceit.