

A Comparative Study of Oriental Literature from a Western View of Joseph Conrad

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Abstract

This article aims to examine and trace the growth of Oriental Literature and its subsequent influence on World Literature. In a period demarcated and dominated by two completely opposite ideologies, namely the ‘Anglicist and Orientalist’ theories, it becomes very interesting to observe how the Colonial and the Western Mindset looked at the ‘colonized’ especially through the lens of the literature of Joseph Conrad, one of the most influential and popular writers in the early 20th century. As an extended influence on English Romanticism, Oriental Literature was instrumental in giving birth to new themes and ideas, enriching the minds of English writers. The discerning theories of Orientalism by Edward Said and OP Kejriwal and of Sub Altern Studies by Gayatri Spivak seemed to bridge our understanding between the ‘orient’ and the ‘occident’. Initially thought to be a theory languishing on the fringe, orientalism slowly grew in prominence, even among British Colonial administrators and scholars who agreed with the idea that Indians should be ruled according to their own traditions and laws, as a direct opposition to ‘Anglicanism’. The colonizers did look down upon the colonized which was quite evident in the literature of that era, a phenomenon also visible in the works of Joseph Conrad. The research paper will therefore try to delineate and present a nuanced comparative analysis of Joseph Conrad’s Western view as part of his works of Oriental Literature.

Keywords: Orient, Colonial, Western, Occident, Sub Altern, Anglicanism, Colonized, Fringe, Comparative, Romanticism, Oriental Literature

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Introduction

“Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter.” This quote by the renowned African writer, J. Nozipo Maraire beautifully captures the essence of the dynamic between a ‘captor’ and a ‘captive’, between the ‘hunter’ and the ‘prey’. A similar dichotomous relationship exists between the ‘colonizer’ and the ‘colonized’, and therefore it would become imperative for the reader to understand this dynamic in order to explore the uniquely haunting world of ‘orientalist literature’. Before we attempt to try to trace the origin for the same, we need to understand the demarcation between the ‘orient’ and the ‘occident’. The ‘Orient’ refers to all the countries that lie on the eastern side of the World, while the ‘Occident’ refers to all those countries that lie on the western side of the World. While this geographical distinction seems pretty straight forward, history between these two areas of the world hasn’t been that simple. Over the years, historians have traced the fraught relationship that existed between the countries of the Orient and the Occident, which has been studied extensively as part of Colonial Studies. However, it was the publication of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’ in 1978, which opened up the world to the idea of Oriental Studies and Orientalism along with its interlinkages with Post-Colonial Studies and the Colonial Discourse. The book despite being a gamechanger in this regard, has remained contentious ever since it was first published in the late 20th century. Said was opposed by various Oriental Scholars as his book supposedly blurred the lines

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between literature, art and politics. Despite the widespread opposition to the book since its publication, it proved to be an insightful discourse into the theoretical practices of the Oriental scholars, thereby helping create further awareness between the distinction of the Orient and the Occident.

Orientalism as a concept has been misrepresented and misquoted on multiple instances, mainly due to the ambiguity that surrounds it (Brennan, 2000). Therefore, to avoid this confusion which often has troubled various academicians, we need to have a clear mental distinction with regards to the context we are providing to the term, 'Orientalist'. The term has various different connotations, namely political, literary, and academic. The Orient has always been watched from the lens of 'colonial subjugation' and that has led to a rather restrictive view of the Orient. Rather than giving the Orient, a wider berth of credit, it has always been viewed from a rather narrow lens, which has led to erroneous representations of the 'Orient'. Its imperative to note the irony here that Orientalism is defined as the 'imitation or depiction of aspects in the Eastern World, by writers, designers and artists from the Western World. The concept of Orientalism has convalesced into a completely different notion today, as compared to the ideas of Orientalism, as first given by Edward Said years ago (Benjamin, 2003). The mutual distrust between the Oriental Countries (mostly referred to Asian and the Middle Eastern countries) and their Western counterparts has made the already fraught relationship even more contentious and that has led to the deepening of the divide. Rather than a divisive relationship based on mutual suspicion, as it has always been portrayed, there should be a world where both contrasting ideologies can exist on opposite sides of the 'cultural fence' and yet co-exist.

In this dichotomous relationship between the East and the West, the Orient and the Occident, lies the notion of the creation of the 'other', which is also a recurring concept in the novels of Joseph Conrad, one of the most influential writers of the 20th Century. Conrad is often widely regarded as the father of the 'psychological novel', due to his ability to delve deep into the psyche of his readers by creating truly flawed and yet lasting characters, which will also be analysed as a part of this paper. The perception of one's identity based on sociological and cultural influences is very essential, as a person's cultural identity is a functioning aspect of an individual's personality. It also becomes important to understand that in order to break the restrictive idea that Orientalism is just what the West thinks about the East, the idea of 'Self Orientalism' slowly gained prominence. Self-Orientalism is defined by keeping the 'Orient' at the centre, and reiterating the idea that Orientalism depends on the Orient itself and not what the West thinks of it (Ruskola, 2013). The Orient itself is responsible for the construction and reinforcement of the orientalist discourse, and therefore people and academicians alike (Samiei, 2010), should tread the fine line when it comes to analysing Oriental literature, especially not by the imbalance in power by Western hegemony, documented across various historical records.

Postcolonialism – Edward Said and Orientalism

One of the most influential figures of post-colonial studies and a pioneer when it comes to the postcolonial discourse and orientalism, Edward Said was born in 1935. Belonging to a Palestinian descent, he is considered to be one of the most significant political activists and academicians of his time. However, it was with the publication of his seminal work, 'Orientalism' in 1979 that he gained prominence across the globe. A literary critic par excellence Said examined literature from a socio-cultural and political point of view. The concept of "Orientalism", introduced and postulated by him, helped create a critical awareness among people about how non-Europeans/ the non-westerners were always being portrayed as mysterious and exotic over the course of history. He argued in his work that the portrayals of

non-European nations have always been done in a rather negative light, deeming them as less developed than their Western counterparts. As per Said, the non-westerners often suffered from several unfortunate instances of ‘cultural appropriation’, case in point the subsequent portrayal of India as a ‘land of magic and snake charmers. It was due to this discriminatory behaviour that the term “othered” was created. This term refers to the act of describing the non-Westerners as homogenous masses, and suggested that ‘their actions are only led by emotions such as lust, terror, and fury’ (Barry 186). He also talks about this further in his much-celebrated text, that the West liked to create and portray a suggestive image of the East, (often referred to as the Orient) who within literature were constantly referred to as the “other”.

If we deconstruct this term further, we realise that apart from suggesting various myths about its inhabitants, “othering” also refers to a particular world view of the Western world, which considers itself superior as compared to the rest of the world. The Orient is constantly undermined and posed as a contrasting opposite to the Occident, with Said calling the Western representations of the East as being “merely imaginative” (Said 2). Said also believed that whatever was believed to be a part of the general consensus about the Orient was mostly created as a result of European education system and its culture. However, Said also reminds us that the terms ‘Orient’ and ‘Orientalism’ were rather too ambiguous and speculative in nature, and therefore its better if its deconstructed to a more simpler level, through the further investigation of the terms with a central focus on literature. (Said 2).

Postcolonialism - Spivak and “othering”

Another influential academician and researcher, when it comes to the postcolonial theory is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who has done immense research work over the course of several years, covering a majority of different avenues belonging to post-colonial theory. A noted literary theorist, and philosopher, Spivak was born in the Eastern part of India in 1942. Influenced by Foucault, Derrida, Marx and above all Edward Said, Spivak is a major theorist in the post-colonial discourse in her own right. Noted for her more feministic approach in her research, Spivak’s major contribution is undoubtedly her work and investigation revolving around the concept of the ‘other’ and ‘othering’. The concept of ‘othering’ can be considered quite essential as it helps shed light and focus about the postcolonial theory and how the Orient has been treated and undermined since ages by the colonial powers. This concept of ‘othering’ also becomes quite helpful in times of application of this theory to different disciplines. Let us now understand what do we mean by the concept of ‘othering’. It refers to the ‘colonized others’ who were pushed to the ‘marginalised fringe’ as a part of the imperial discourse. What’s unfortunate is that these people were separated and identified by their variability with reference to the ‘centre’ and therefore came towards being the focal point of a rather unique term, called the ‘anticipated mastery’ caused by the ‘imperial ego’. (Ashcroft et al., 2013).

The Western sense of superiority stems from the subsequent step motherly treatment meted out to the Oriental regions, and therefore this distinction of the ‘others’ and ‘us’ despite being in other words, the inferiority that is attributed to the East by the West helps to construct its superiority, and by creating an “other”, it is easier to make the distinction between what is from West and what is from East by simplifying it to terms such as “us” and the “others”.

It may sound as a minor issue, but this discrimination between the ‘us’ and the ‘others’, may lead to the dehumanisation of the ‘sub-altern’, also providing a mirror to the society, showing the inherent shallowness hidden within.

Post-Colonial Literature

Postcolonial literature basically, refers to a category of literature that includes works that are connected to the dominating forces of imperialism and colonial expansion. Post-Colonial Literature therefore refers to that genre of literature which has arisen primarily post the Second World War from those areas of the world which underwent decolonization. Those areas include Nigeria, the Indian Sub-Continent, South Africa, and the Caribbean.

Postcolonialism primarily concerns itself with the colonial discourse and the study of colonisation which dates back to as early as the Renaissance. It also includes the decolonization process, which ironically hasn't been discussed much, even though it has been such an essential part of the colonial discourse. Decolonisation basically refers to the process of the winning back and restitution of the native cultures. There also is a modern variant to these phenomenon's referred to as 'Neo Colonialism' a direct genesis of Post Modernism and Capitalism, an era dominated by MNCs. The power struggles between different cultures, especially at the intersection of cultures, leads to a multi-cultural and poly-valent cultural discourse, which is thereby studied as a part of Post Colonialism, with regards to gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, language and above all cultural identity.

Post-Colonial Literature and Criticism has been deeply influenced by the postmodern idea of 'decentring', whereby it undermines the omniscient claims of literature, and connects to the colonial solitudes of the canon, by rewriting history and asserting cultural identities through various strategies such as nativism, hybridity, mimicry and assimilation. Reinforced by an anti-existentialist notion of cultural identity and a Eurocentric idea of modernity. Major Postcolonial Theoretical Works include *Orientalism* (Said, 1978), *In Other Worlds* (1987) by Gayatri Spivak, *The Empire Writes Back* Ashcroft, (1989) *Nation and Narration* Brennan & Bhabha, (1990), and *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward Said (1978). The people belonging to indigenous communities who have suffered a lot, as a part of living on the margins, have increasingly found a rightful outlet to voice their opinions and assert their identity and visions for their lives ahead. By telling their own stories and sharing their unique experiences they in a way reclaim their heritage and their past.

Europeans with the aim of finding different avenues of representation, constructed the natives in politically motivated ways and it is here that the role of Post Colonialism becomes quite pivotal, to the sense that it intends to With the objective of locating the modes of representation where Europeans constructed natives in politically prejudiced ways, post-colonial criticism intends to discover such literary themes and figures that have enforced the imperialistic ideology, colonial subjugation and the lasting hegemony of the West. It therefore strives to locate the hidden facet beneath the clearly visible exterior layer of universal, humanistic themes and reveal the stark reality of the various gendered, imperial and racial assumptions hidden below. The critics of the Postcolonial era attempt a reiteration and careful perusal of the values of different literary texts, by putting an emphasis on the varied contexts in which those texts were published, thereby probing the innate colonial ideologies hidden within. These approaches that we discuss here, have been articulated wonderfully in postcolonial texts like , Edward Said's rereading of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Homi K Bhabha's rereading of Forster's *A Passage to India* and Chinua Achebe's rereading, of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Another influential work in this regard is Frantz Fanon's seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth* which was published in the French language in the year 1961. Set at the backdrop of the Algerian struggle to become an independent nation and break free from French subjugation, Fanon's seminal work examined the different instances of anti-colonial violence in the Algerian region and the areas surrounding it. An intellectual in his own right, Fanon was born

in Martinique, and was an influential member of the Algerian National Liberation Front. His passionate works, where he called upon an entire nation for the sake of liberation from colonial subjugation inspired numerous people across the globe, suffering from similar causative racially inspired violence.

1979, a year that changed the course of history with the publication of Edward Said's seminal work 'Orientalism'. The text examined the power and cultural dynamic between the East and the West, the Occident and the Orient. Gradually this text grew in prominence among academic circles and soon became a staple template for post-colonial subjects and discourses, also enabling the development of the field further. Edward Said belonged to a Palestinian heritage and taught at Columbia University for a major part of his life. Along with Said, other influential thinkers in postcolonial theory, include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha.

Origins and Early Writers

The idea and concept of postcolonial studies may have germinated several years back, but it started taking shape quite recently in the 1970s and the 1980s, when several writers began publishing their works post the Second World War. A pathbreaking novel to emerge during these times was undoubtedly (Achebe, 1994). The work enjoyed immense praise and adulation from critics and masses alike and continues to remain an influential work in this regard.

Achebe published *Things Fall Apart* in the late 1950s, when the British Colonial period was nearing its end in Nigeria. The novel revolves around Okonkwo, the protagonist of the story, leader of an Igbo village. The novel is set in the later part of the 19th century. The protagonist Okonkwo, witnesses the unfortunate downfall of his 'precious' culture, caused due to colonial forces.

Another early work of post-colonial fiction which proved to have an enduring legacy is Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* published in 1966. A bildungsroman novel, it centres around an unnamed protagonist who returns to his Sudanese village from England after many years. His return proves to be quite unfortunate as he gets to know about the disheartening fall of his nation at the hands of colonial powers. Originally written in Arabic, the novel was later published in English in 1969.

Moving from novels to Post colonial dramas, you are bound to stumble upon Walcott, (1970) a significant post-colonial play which helped pave the forward for innumerable post-colonial writers in the future.

Originally hailing from St Lucia, Walcott primarily focused upon the trials and tribulations faced by the people of the West Indies. Through his plays, Walcott aimed to inspire the people to reclaim the heritage of the Caribbean and engage with each other by asking important questions about Caribbean politics and history. His plays proved to be a much-needed panacea for Caribbean people, looking for a cathartic experience after years of colonial subjugation.

The famous critic and literary theorist Terry Eagleton in his book *After Theory* claims that postcolonial theory and literature are some of the most flourishing fields when it comes to cultural theory.

Themes and Relevance

As we are ushered into the beginning of the 21st Century, Postcolonial literature is still as relevant in our lives as before. The postcolonial discourse and theoretical studies have lasted and stood the test of time. Initially as discussed above, the main area of discussion centred around the concepts of the 'Us' and the 'Other', thereby focusing on identity. However, the

horrendous attacks of 9/11 proved to be a watershed moment in not just American history, but at the Global stage as well, resulting in the shifting of focus from Cultural Identity to the parallels and differences between two civilizations and cultures and causative migration as an aftermath.

As a concept, Post Colonialism has had several Interlinkages with the histories of different nations and therefore over the course of years, the post-colonial discourse has shaped into an effective platform for debates and discussions for contemporary socio-political issues of that period. Another reason why post-colonial literature has stood the test of time, is because it continues to construct and reinvent itself as per the changing needs of the time. Irrespective of any period, or any nation, the post-colonial discourse and the Oriental theory continue to remain relevant, even in this 'Post Truth' and 'Neo-colonial' era. In order to be a part of canonical literature, any theory or discourse should be flexible and keep reinventing and adapting to changing societal needs and avenues. The present course of contentious disputations regarding the impact of Climate Change and its resultant effect on different nations and the environment at large, has also been covered as a part of the Oriental and post-colonial discourse due to the interlinkages with internal and external migration, border conflicts and neo colonial conflicts, between the Occident (the West) and the Neo-Orient (which is gaining in prominence day by day). A few Literary examples in this regard could include, Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, Kamila's *Burnt Shadows* and *Home Fire*, Mohammad Hanif's *Red Bird* and several others within the same domain.

Similar to other kinds of literature, Postcolonial literature may not offer to be a one stop solution for the different issues faced by humanity, although it does make a wonderful statement of these issues which can result towards an improved understanding of the varied issues that plague the world today. It's a known fact that today we are moving towards a more unequal world, where the majority of global wealth is being concentrated among the top 1 percent. In this unfortunately skewed world, it seems that we are situated at the edge of a dormant volcano waiting to erupt, as the frustrated jobless youth can stir a very destructive revolution and in order to stem this supposed disastrous future, it becomes even more important to have a platform where such issues can be resolved through mediation and communication, where Postcolonial literature can prove to be a significant tool. The postcolonial discourse and oriental theory can also provide representation to the subjugator and also to those who were subjugated, giving an equal platform for views belonging to both ends of the spectrum.

As a theory, postcolonialism postulates the identity of a 'colonized society' that deals with the various trials and tribulations that arise in the path of building a common national identity after facing years of harrowing experience at the hands of the suppressors. Postcolonial Literature also further deals with how the various writers discuss and revel in the glory of their identity, which they seem to often reclaim by surprisingly maintaining warm connections with the coloniser as well. The way to do that is through the creation of a kind of literature that discusses and debates different notions related to cultural identity and do a detailed critique of the changes that happened as a result of colonialism and even talks about how things have been faring ever since, even in the present state of neo-colonial societies. It also deals with the various changes happening across different cultures which occur in the post-colonial societies and further lead to a cross-cultural notion in the society at large, along with in literature. Things aren't however as rosy as they seem. This obsession with the sole focus on the quest for identity hassled to various criticisms across the arc including various academic scholars. On the other hand, some academicians and writers also argue that 'identity' is an important focal point for the better understanding of one self, which also helps in connecting with the society along with

the rest of the world. Identity also plays a pivotal role in the formation and forging of cultural relationships across nations. These key features overlap; that is, when tackling one of them we find ourselves unconsciously talking about the other. Some of these key features consist of the notions of language, home, hybridity, multiculturalism and otherness.

Although Said and Spivak have rejected the term postcolonial for various reasons, their works together with the work of Bhabha, paved the way to postcolonial theorists and helped them in a way or another.

Joseph Conrad and his Western View of Orientalism

Joseph Conrad is widely considered to be one of the greatest novelists in English, despite the surprising fact that he did not speak the language fluently, until his teens, although marked with a thick Polish accent. The novels and works of Conrad were predominantly based on 'nautical and seaborne themes', displaying the important qualities of 'courage' and 'honour'. Joseph Conrad was a prose stylist par excellence, who is credited with bringing the unique non-English tragic sensibility into the English language. Despite having supposed romantic strains in his works, Conrad is widely recognised as a precursor to contemporary modernist literature.

Writing during the glorious days of the British Empire, Conrad published a lot of work, influenced by his experiences in the British Merchant Navy and his time in France. This helped him create works that reflected the Western ideology and view of a worldwide empire, proving the age-old adage that, the 'Sun never sets on the British Empire'. By analysing the various novels as well as short stories written by Conrad, we find out that he was deeply influenced by the strict world view set by the Westerners, which looked down upon and undermined the Orientalists and also built an omnipotent and omniscient image of the West, especially the British. It may seem as a direct offshoot of Conrad's inherent patriotism. However, we also realise his ability of reaching to the depths of the human soul in his classic works.

Conrad's unique narrative style and the heart wrenching portrayal of his anti-heroic characters have undoubtedly influenced many authors. Over the course of his long and illustrious writing career, the various academic pieces, research papers and essays written by Conrad show us that he possessed an active bond and a fruitful relationship with the British public. Along with being a professional writer, he was also a professionally acclaimed seaman. His knowledge of the lives and culture of the local British populace, his 'inherent Nationalism', paired with his deep understanding of human psychology, makes Conrad one of the most influential modern-day writers. In his early novels, Conrad focused on a variety of themes such as; maritime history in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *Typhoon*; the 'hidden' rules of social inclusion that define the gentleman, in *Lord Jim* and above all imperialism in *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*.

Towards the later part of the twentieth century, Conrad enjoyed an unbelievable amount of growth in readership and in critical acclaim as well. Academicians, readers and critics across the globe have realised that despite Conrad's last book, *The Rover* being published in the early part of the 20th century, he undoubtedly is one of the most modern writers in the contemporary times, when it comes to both, theme and technique.

As the main architect and proponent of the 'modern psychological novel' Conrad has had put special emphasis on in depth character analysis. Majority of the writers try to create new plot situations and that therefore, becomes their sole point of concern. Unlike them, Conrad likes to work on the "portrayal of different people and how they react to different plot situations." In a world where the writers were able to create "an effective lie", (a fallacy of a plot that gets sold mainly because it was written to attract readers, without being of any literary value), Conrad

denies to be set up within that same box, despite confessing his ability to produce such works as well. Majority of Conrad's novels revolve around the 'solitary hero; who is isolated and kept apart from the rest, either intentionally or by fate. These themes of alienation and isolation, are yet another reflection of Conrad's superimposition of the 'western ideology', projecting the lonely white man, alienated from the rest, may it be in Conrad's political novels, or his sea board novels and even most importantly in his 'Oriental novels'.

A major recurring characteristic of Conrad's works, is the presence of the "loners" which are visibly manifested in a lot of his works, may it be Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* or Razumov in *Under Western Eyes* or Jim in *Lord Jim*. Conrad's focus on the isolated and the alienated figure has significantly influenced on the subsequent development and direction of the twentieth century. This influence has been discovered in disparate writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and even the great T.S Eliot. This is the very reason why Conrad's unique World view shaped by his Western mindset helped him delve more into the minds of different characters and in turn helped shape the modern contemporary novel.

As a forerunner in this regard, he was one of the first contemporary novelists to use two very important defining techniques in the novel, the first one being using the 'shifting points of views' as done in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*. This technique enabled Conrad to get an in-depth deconstructed view of the psyche of the different characters, a hallmark of his illustrious writing career.

Apart from that, the other significant technique used by Conrad is the extensive and recurring use of the flashback is another pioneering technique, frequently employed by Conrad in his novels. The flashback becomes an important literary tool to not just create suspense and intrigue, but also helps to thoroughly examine and identify the different machinations and motivations of the various characters. Right in the moment of the action post the denouement phase, Conrad presents the crisis, during the imminent climax and gradually retraces the events back to the start, thereby creating a psychological pattern, finally identifying what led to that climactic action.

To conclude, it would be worth reiterating that Conrad is undoubtedly among the greatest Symbolists that we find in English literature today. His Western Ideology and its unique perspective towards the Orient and Oriental Literature, the usage of rather unconventional imagery and symbols, connected to various metaphysical metaphors creates an unparalleled and lasting literary legacy, rivalled by no one else.

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