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THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CULTURAL OTHER IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S STORY «KARAIN: A MEMORY»

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The article aims at examining Joseph Conrad's vision of the Malay region and its image building forces in his story «Karain: A Memory» (1897), which articulates the representation of some late 19th-century social and cultural constructs of the Other and becomes a part of literary dialogue between East and West. **Methods.** An imagological approach and the strategies of cultural studies are applied in the article to highlight how Conrad's story «Karain: A Memory» is used to assert the Other's cultural identity, constructing and deconstructing some national stereotypes and cultural prejudices of the period. **Results.** The idea is that the fictional world of the Malayan Archipelago as reconstructed by Conrad through the narrative of «Karain: A Memory» contributes to the meanings attached to the image of the Malays (that is national characterisation) and serves as a medium in the accumulative Western construction of the East and the cultural Other. **Scientific novelty.** There has been made an attempt to prove that Conrad's works demonstrate the complex manner of textual representations in which nineteenth-century cultural assumptions, concerning European civilization and colonial periphery, are simultaneously revived and challenged. **The practical significance.** The article may serve for the further research of the cultural Other and its representation in the English literature.

Key words: cultural Other, national stereotypes, cultural identity, colonial discourse, Joseph Conrad.

КОНСТРУЮВАННЯ КУЛЬТУРНОГО «ІНШОГО» В ОПОВІДАННІ ДЖОЗЕФА КОНРАДА «КАРАЇН: СПОГАД»

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РЕФЕРАТ

Мета. У статті досліджуються авторська візія і складові твореного Джозефом Конрадом образу Малайського архіпелагу в оповіданні «Караїн: спогад» (1897), яке артикулює художні репрезентації окремих соціальних і культурних конструктів «Іншого» кінця XIX ст. і є частиною літературного діалогу між Сходом і Заходом. **Дослідницька методика.** У статті використано імагологічний підхід та стратегії культурологічних студій, за допомогою яких здійснено аналіз того, як в оповіданні Конрада «Караїн: спогад» сконструйовано культурну ідентичність «Іншого» через реконструкцію та деконструкцію деяких національних стереотипів і культурних упереджень доби. **Результати.** Показано, що фікційний світ Малайського архіпелагу, реконструйований Конрадом в оповіданні «Караїн: спогад», доповнює значення, що закріплюються за образом малайців (тобто національні риси), і слугує засобом вираження кумулятивного конструювання Заходом Сходу і культурного «Іншого». **Наукова новизна.** У статті зроблено спробу довести, що твори Конрада представляють собою складні художні репрезентації, які одночасно артикулюють та оскаржують культурні уявлення XIX століття щодо європейської цивілізації та коло-

ніальної периферії. **Практична цінність.** Стаття може слугувати основою для подальшого дослідження проблеми культурного «Іншого» та його репрезентації в англійській літературі.

Ключові слова: культурний «Інший», національні стереотипи, культурна ідентичність, колоніальний дискурс, Джозеф Конрад.

For centuries, especially since the «era of geographical discoveries» and the expansion of the spacial perception of the world, ethnography and cultural anthropology have created epistemological models of the cultural Other, the alien, the different, which, to agree with Bernard McGrane («Beyond Anthropology, Society and the Other», 1989), have been legitimated by the literature of the Enlightenment, with its cult of knowledge and the contrast between the European subject and non-European Other (works by Defoe, Rousseau, Montesquieu, etc.). The Orient turned into «a terrain for literary exploitation» [7, p. 192]. However, in most cases the «European's images of non-European man are not primarily, if at all, descriptions of real people, but rather projections of this own nostalgia and feeling of inadequacy» [qtd. in 6, p. 2], appearing as a result of an identity anxiety, but commonly done in a stereotypical manner that serves to reassure the Europeans of their superiority. In fact, the cultural Other, that is, the Other as non-European, contains a potential danger, forcing the European to re-consider the conceptual foundations of the European civilization and to reconceptualise the assumptions about the uniqueness of its cultural identity, its moral and religious values. Since, as McGrane claims, a «culture that discovers what is alien to itself simultaneously manifests what it is in itself» [6, p. 1].

Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (1978), explains the nature of the construction of the Other as part of historical, social, and political process: «The construction of identity <...> while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences <...> involves establishing opposites and „others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from „us”. Each age and society re-creates its „Others”. Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of „other” is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a context involving individuals and institutions in all societies <...> human identity is not only not natural and stable, but constructed, and occasionally even invented outright» [7, p. 332]. So, attitude towards alterity (the Other) is integral to the construction of identity; otherness and identity are two inseparable sides inherently intertwined: the «creation of otherness <...> consists of applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into two hierarchical groups: them and us. The out-group [„Them”, „Other”] is only coherent as a group as a result of its opposition to the in-group [„Us”, the Self] and its lack of identity. This lack is based upon stereotypes that are largely stigmatizing and obviously simplistic» [9, p. 2]. A stereotype, as social psychology defines it, is «a generalization about a group of people in which incidental characteristics are assigned to virtually all members of the group» [1, p. 429]. So the formation of stereotypes is «a mental and cognitive rather than a literary process; nonetheless it is obvious that stereotypes of any humane aggregate have been articulated verbally in literary contexts and have become literary stereotypes as a result» [1, p. 429]. In fact, how we perceive «us» and

«them» continues to be the major impetus for the ontology of philosophical, cultural, psychological, and literary discourse; identity is constituted within representation.

The increased interest and contact with the East in the nineteenth century – by mostly merchants, missionaries, servicemen, travellers, natural historians, and writers – resulted in it being communicated back to Europe through different literary texts attempting at imaginative reconstruction of the cultural Other and at bridging the gap between «us» and «them». In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British literature, to remember the works of Rudyard Kipling, Robert L. Stevenson, Rider Haggard, Edward Forster, and Leonard Woolf, for example, one can find a discrete presence of foreign, exotic characters, which though play minor roles, often prove to be important for the plot development and for the definition of the main characters' British identity. In the context of this tradition, the early works of Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), chronicling his own intercultural subjectivity, demonstrate a complex manner of textual representations in which nineteenth-century European cultural assumptions, that is, the rhetoric of colonial discourse concerning the cultural Other as lacking identity, are simultaneously revived and challenged. The aim of this survey is to trace how a writer of Polish background writing in English manages to reproduce in his texts the complexity of East–West relations at the turn of the century and to create the literary image of the Malayan Archipelago and the Malays; whether his verbal suggestions of the cultural Other's representation are clear-cut and stereotypical.

Joseph Conrad's Malay story «Karain: A Memory» (1897), included in his first published short-story collection, *Tales of Unrest* (1898), is an early example of the author's ambivalent mode of representation of the cultural Other and a reflection of his personal experience of alterity. Peter Firchow makes the point: «Given the many years – half a lifetime, practically – that Conrad had spent wandering the world in ships or being stranded for weeks in remote places in the Pacific, often sharing close quarters with people from a wide variety of national and ethnic backgrounds, it is not surprising that he should seek to reflect this multinational, multiethnic experience in his work» [4, p. 7], offering the space, usually the alien world far away from the Empire's metropolis, for the interaction of different identities. Simultaneously, Conrad's writings «coincided with an epistemological crisis as well as a crisis of empire» [2, p. 24], which gave rise to an anthropological desire to «know» – that is, to describe and understand – non-European Other to assert the imperial self.

Evoking the impression of outer tranquillity, the very opening scene of «Karain: A Memory» transports the European reader to the exotic space of the Other – one of the islands of the Malay Archipelago: «...a signal fire gleams like a jewel on the high brow of a sombre cliff; great trees, the advanced sentries of immense forests, stand watchful and still over sleeping stretches of open water; a line of white surf thunders on an empty beach, the shallow water foams on the reefs; and green islets scattered through the calm of noonday lie upon the level of a polished sea, like a handful of emeralds on a buckler of steel» [3, p. 36]. Though deprived of the idea of racial difference, this luminous landscape on the periphery of empire appears in sharp contrast to the closing images of late nineteenth-century London: «A watery gleam of sunshine flashed from the west and went out between two long lines of walls; and

then the broken confusion of roofs, the chimney-stacks, the gold letters sprawling over the fronts of houses, the sombre polish of windows, stood resigned and sullen under the falling gloom. The whole length of the street, deep as a well and narrow like a corridor, was full of a sombre and ceaseless stir. <...> Innumerable eyes stared straight in front, feet moved hurriedly, blank faces flowed, arms swung» [3, p. 67]. These representations of the Empire's metropolis, being familiar to Conrad's contemporaries, take them back to the European reality.

In his early fiction, Conrad as if tends to write both within and against the conventional discourse of difference of his time based on the idea of the «known unknown», when the otherness is regarded through stereotyping. In «Karain: A Memory», the favourable scenery image of the Other's space, the story opens with, is followed by the generalized image of the Malays, emphasizing their cultural diversity: «...*faces dark, truculent, and smiling; the frank audacious faces of men barefooted, well armed and noiseless. They thronged the narrow length of our schooner's decks with their ornamented and barbarous crowd, with the variegated colours of checkered sarongs, red turbans, white jackets, embroideries; with the gleam of scabbards, gold rings, charms, armlets, lance blades, and jewelled handles of their weapons. They had an independent bearing, resolute eyes, a restrained manner; and we seem yet to hear their soft voices speaking of battles, travels, and escapes; <...> sometimes in well-bred murmurs extolling their own valour, our generosity...*» [3, p. 36]. The above passage points to the otherness of the Orient in colourful yet contradictory images, which reconstruct certain Orientalist stereotypes of the natives as barefooted «*ornamented and barbarous crowd*» but, simultaneously, manifest appreciation of and admiration for their «*independent bearing, resolute eyes, and restrained way*», constructing a complex hetero-image of the Malays and one of their leaders – Karain, a Malay war-chief and the ruler of three villages who comes from «*a small Bugis state on the island of Celebes*» [3, p. 42] and with whom a group of Englishmen trade guns.

Though the title of Conrad's short story suggests the predominance of Karain's voice and consciousness, haunted by the ghost of his betrayed friend Pata Matara, the focus of the narrative is, in fact, divided between the Malay's personal story and the frame narrator's reaction to Karain. At the beginning of «Karain: A Memory», the frame narrator, who is English and part of the empire's trade interests, provides what we might take as Western perspective in the representation of the Malay world, the world of the cultural, racial and religious otherness. He diminishes Karain's image as a ruler, which echoes Orientalist discourses: according to the narrator, Karain is «*the master of an insignificant foothold [emphasis added] on the earth – of a conquered foothold that, shaped like a young moon, lay ignored between the hills and the sea*» [3, p. 37]. Later on, the narrator, whose voice shapes the representations of Karain in the text, compares him to an actor filling the stage with «*barbarous dignity*» [3, p. 39]: «*It was the stage where, dressed splendidly for his part, he strutted, incomparably dignified, made important by the power he had to awaken an absurd expectation of something heroic going to take place <...> He was ornate and disturbing <...> he presented himself essentially as an actor, as a human being aggressively disguised. His smallest acts were prepared and unexpected, his speeches*

grave, his sentences ominous like hints and complicated like arabesques. He was treated with a solemn respect accorded in the irreverent West only to the monarchs of the stage <...> It was almost impossible to remember who he was – only a petty chief of a conveniently isolated corner of Mindanao...» [3, p. 38]. Providing a theatrical presentation of Karain, the above passage articulates the problem of intercultural communication which results in a gap between the Malay, that is, the non-European, and the European, the Englishman, for whom Karain is rather a hero of the epic past or a funny and fearing figure in the «*painted*» exotic scene which does not seem «real». From the particular, Conrad moves to the universal in his representation of Karain: «*He summed up his race, his country, the elemental force of ardent life, of tropical nature. He had its luxuriant strength, its fascination; and, like it, he carried the seed of peril within*» [3, p. 38]. So the «wild-eyed» Other, as represented by the narrator, implies the ambivalence of desire for and fear of.

The clichéd characterisations given to the Malay chief by the English narrator, gun smuggler participating in the story, point to the asymmetry in relationships and acknowledge the British moral, intellectual and social superiority: he points to Karain's «*profound ignorance of the rest of the world*» and to the «*childish shrewdness*» of his arguments; he thinks him «*racially incapable*» of steadfastness [3, p. 45] and even dangerous – «*Sometimes we caught glimpses of a sombre, glowing fury within him – a brooding and vague sense of wrong, and a concentrated lust of violence which is dangerous in a native*» [3, p. 45]. These representations of othering, when using demeaning and denigrating terms, project a nineteenth-century stereotype-ridden image of Southeast Asia as an underdeveloped periphery populated by «easily impressed» barbarous people with «primitive ideas» incapable to understand the «reality» of the West, which formed the basis of colonial discourse in the late 19th century, the period of the institutionalisation of colonial geography in Europe.

In his turn, Karain is also depicted as a bearer of stereotypes which existed in the area concerning the British and their moral predominance over the Malays. Karain is fascinated by the far-off Queen as «*the holder of a sceptre the shadow of which, stretching from the westward over the earth and over the seas, passed far beyond his own hand's-breadth of conquered land*» and speaks of her «*with a kind of affectionate awe*» [3, p. 41] calling «*Great, Invincible, Pious, and Fortunate*» [3, p. 42]. Besides, he considers all of the Europeans to be gentlemen by birth and «*emissaries of Government*» [3, p. 41], thus giving priority to the white men only due to their racial identity. All these instances represent Karain as subject to the categories and practices imposed by the European as dominant in-group, as the Other that consolidates the West as the guarantor of truth and power.

Later in the text, however, the worlds of Europeans and natives interact in the course of communication, their relationships develop and the image of Karain alters. He is depicted among his people with respect and admiration: «*We saw him once walking in daylight amongst the houses of the settlement. At the doors of huts groups of women turned to look after him, warbling softly, and with gleaming eyes; armed men stood out of the way, submissive and erect; others approached from the side, bending their backs to address him humbly; an old woman stretched out a draped*

lean arm – „Blessings on thy head!” she cried <...> To no man had been given the shelter of so much respect, confidence, and awe» [3, p. 43, 44] He is also said to understand «irrigation and the art of war – the qualities of weapons and the craft of boat-building», to «negotiate more tortuously than any man of his race» [3, p. 39], and to talk of inter-island politics. Such representations counterbalance the previous negative hetero-image of the Malay chief.

The further subversion of the English narrator's views of Karain and his world comes when the Malay reveals the story of his inner unrest. Karain's tale about his native country, exile, wanderings, love, miscegenation, betrayal, death and haunting by Pata Matara, the friend Karain betrayed and killed, shows that «the basic ingredients of human life are the same; that the natives are not inferior beings; and that, despite differences in customs and the level of civilisation, mankind shares basic goals and dreams» [8, p. 28]. However, until Karain tells his tale, as Daniel Schwarz points out, «the English narrator could not imagine that a native could feel the same complex emotions of guilt and sorrow, of loyalty and hope, as a Western man» [8, p. 30]. Employing the strategy of storytelling, Conrad enables Karain – that is, the cultural Other – to speak his mind about the natives and the Europeans in order to understand the difference between himself and his English friends, and thus breaking down some of the cultural barriers between them. Moreover, representing his English characters as sufficiently sensitive to their Malay friend's story of his «tortured private self» [8, p. 29] and pointing at some moments to the sameness of their emotions and their mutual wish to respect the values and traditions of the other, Conrad alters the nineteenth-century Eurocentric notion of native as utterly different: through his writing, he uses methods of differentiation to examine ways in which individuals are connected to and relate to each other. His narrative demonstrates a certain wish to understand and embrace the difference and the storytelling situation provides a reassuring context for this conviction of a universal bond: «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 a wanderer and a friend, to him who does not come to teach or to rule, to him who asks for nothing and accepts all things, words are spoken by the camp-fires, in the shared solitude of the sea, in riverside villages, in resting-places surrounded by forests – words are spoken that take no account of race or colour. One heart speaks – another one listens; and the earth, the sea, the sky, the passing wind and the stirring leaf, hear also the futile tale of the burden of life» [3, p. 50]. According to Conrad, as can be seen from the above passage, cultural interaction is possible only when it is a «dialogue between equals».

In «Karain: A Memory», Joseph Conrad employs different narrative perspectives to obscure his personal attitude towards imperialism, never directly referring to racial problems, and his narrator does not manifest the initial faith in the western «civilising mission» in the «dark» places of the world. In fact, by making his English characters and readers encounter exotic and remote cultures, Conrad forced them face their own ethnicity, since the background of the cultural Other highlighted the positive and negative sides of their own mental image. So Conrad's story constitutes an important dimension of the formation of the self in relation to the Other and serves a fictional illustration to the anthropological dilemma that «the European

mind can only discover truths about its origins by going outside the physical limits of its culture» [5, p. 32]. In addition, though «Karain: A Memory» revives some stereotypical images relating to Malaya, both as a place and as a people, it shows the evolution of Europeans' ideas about those cultures they considered exotic and questions established clichés, characterizing both the Western observer and the Eastern observed Other.

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