

ASPECTS OF HYBRIDISM IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *ALMAYER'S FOLLY* AND *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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Abstract

In the light of concepts put forth by cultural theorists like Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Clifford Geertz, among others, this essay discusses Joseph Conrad's novels *Almayer's Folly* and *Heart of Darkness* as stagings of the conflicts inherent in the syncretic nature of all culture. In the first novel, the protagonist's daughter, Nina, the offspring of an interracial marriage, is analyzed as a projection of the problems of racial and cultural hybridism. The theme recurs in *Heart of Darkness*, in the figure of the "harlequin", whose mixed ancestry and motley appearance make him the butt of continuous abuse. A fictional anticipation of Michel Serres' allegorical harlequin, the half-caste proves close to three Conradian characters: Nina, in *Almayer's Folly*, and, in *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz and Marlow, the narrator. Conrad's two novels thus nod to each other as mutually illuminating references, fictional premonitions of the key postcolonial category of hybridity.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad; Hybridism; *Heart of Darkness*

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Caliban:
*Thou didst prevent me: I had peopled else
 This isle with Calibans.*
 Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*, 1-2-350-351.

In 1890 Joseph Conrad went up the Congo, “to his highest point of navigation”, on one of his last and most audacious journeys. In those days, Conrad was still Józef Theodor Konrad Korzeniowski, the young expatriate Polish seaman, a Russian citizen in name only: since the end of the eighteenth century, Poland, then part of the Russian Empire, had been no more than a tenuous fiction of colonial identity. The journey would provide material for the writing, almost ten years later, of Conrad’s first masterpiece, *Heart of Darkness*. As he went up the river, he also carried in his luggage the initial chapters of his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*.

At the time, forced by personal and political circumstances into a condition of displacement and off-centeredness, Conrad struggled with a cosmopolitanism which found literal and metaphorical expression in what we may call a process of constant translation, or, as J. Clifford puts it, of “maximal linguistic complexity” (101). The young traveller was in fact constructing his world in three languages. His mother tongue had been revived by a recent visit to Poland. His second, the French of the Imperial Belgian Congo and of his youth in Marseille, recurred in his letters to Marguerite Poradowska, a cousin by marriage, with whom he was involved in something Clifford calls “largely a literary entanglement.” At the same time, Conrad also kept a diary in English, the language of his African friendship with the Irish diplomat Roger Casement, of his future marriage and writing career, as well as of the British nationality he would adopt just before the composition of *Heart of Darkness* in 1898-99. No better preparation than this continuous involvement with translation between languages and cultures could be devised for the development of a profound awareness of transcultural relationships, which was to evolve into one of Conrad’s central themes. More, perhaps, than any contemporary writer, he was able to realize the problematic construction of cultural selves, constantly entangled in the diverging webs of meaning woven by different peoples in distant places and changing times. The biographic coincidences between *Almayer’s Folly* and *Heart of Darkness* signal another coalescence. Both novels crucially reveal Conrad’s obsession with themes recurring in present-day cultural criticism, such as the impossibility to discover the right and pure culture and the connection between discourse and the wielding of power. The two novels also project a set of all-important related matters, which may be summed up under the central question of hybridism.

The quest for original purity in *Almayer’s Folly*

The plot of *Almayer’s Folly* turns on the failure of Kaspar Almayer’s imperialist dream. A second-generation Dutch colonial living in Indonesia, symptomatically placed at a crossroad of cultures – European, Arab, Philippine, Malay– Almayer curbs his white man’s pride and marries an imperfectly acculturated Malay girl.

The daughter of Sulu (Philippine) pirates, captured in the course of a bloody encounter, the young woman has become the adoptive daughter of her captor, the trader Lingard. In exchange for the alliance, Lingard promises the ambitious but confused young man the key to commercial success and the revelation of the secret route to a fabulous gold mine. Almayer vainly hopes to mend his fortunes with the settlement of a British trading post. So he builds a large house which gradually comes to be known as “Almayer’s Folly”. But the British presence never materializes; Borneo remains under Dutch rule, and the house becomes a visible joke, the reminder of the character’s misjudgment.

The representation of the protagonist as a loser in the tough imperialist game is impressive for this first novel, competently constructed on the model of traditional realist nineteenth-century fiction. However, the text seems even more centrally concerned with another futile hope, entertained by Almayer’s daughter Nina. A beautiful half-caste, the offspring of his interracial marriage, the young woman nurses the dream to recapture the mythical purity of her native ancestors’ culture. Under the spell of her mother’s tales about her race’s warlike past, Nina tries to discard her white heritage and chooses her dark half. She elopes with Dain Maroola, a Balinese Rajah’s son. The success of her attempt to eliminate her white heritage may, however, be called into question. An analysis of the novel, in spite of its seemingly happy end, will reveal Nina’s conflicts, summed up as the unsolved problem of racial and cultural hybridism, the syncretic nature of all culture: after all, as we may remember, hybridity is, and has been for millennia, a feature of most human populations.

Hybridism in *Heart of Darkness*

Roughly ten years intervene between *Almayer’s Folly* and *Heart of Darkness*, a novel about a voyage up the Congo River into the heart of Africa, in which Charles Marlow, the narrator, tells his story aboard a boat anchored on the river Thames. The plot turns on Marlow’s obsession with the ivory trader Kurtz. Raising questions about imperialism and racism, the text leads the reader to wonder whether there is any real difference between so-called civilized peoples and those described as savages. The theme of hybridity, central to *Almayer’s Folly*, recurs in the figure of the “harlequin”, a label for Kurtz’s young associate. The harlequin owes this designation to the fact that, with the limited resources of a remote trading outpost, he has been forced to cover his originally brown holland clothes with bright patches. Initially believed to be English, he is also alluded to as a twenty-five-year old Russian, differently perceived by the several characters that make the foci of narrative consciousness. For another narrator, a sailor retelling Marlow’s story, the harlequin’s mere existence seems inexplicable and altogether bewildering. Marlow sees him quite differently: “a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake” (Conrad 90), a living embodiment of the efficiency celebrated by the character as the hallmark of enlightened English imperialism, in contrast with those of old invaders, the Romans, who were “no colonists”, but “mere conquerors” (Conrad,

50). Otherwise, the manager of the post where Marlow waits for his ship to be repaired angrily refers to the “be-patched youth” as “that scoundrel”, a “wanderer trader”, “a pestilential fellow” (Conrad 90-1). These contradictory assessments are matched by conflicting references to the young man’s ancestry. In the passage reporting a dialogue overheard by Marlow between the manager and his nephew, he is first alluded to as “an English-half-caste”, then simply as “the half-caste”. This explicit identification, added to the several references to his clearly emblematic motley clothes, proves more than enough to establish the young man’s hybrid condition, an unavoidable fact across time, geography, and culture.

The harlequin plays a key role in the novel. Marlow’s trip to the heart of Africa is partly a quest for Kurtz, whom the man in motley reverently serves. A first-class trader from a distant outpost, Kurtz seems to embody Marlow’s ideal of efficiency: he has been sending in as much ivory as all the others put together. The youth in motley is the only white man who helps the trader collect his ivory treasure and nurses him in his terminal illness. In fact, the harlequin is the one who finally ends Marlow’s search by taking him to the dying Kurtz. Yet this devoted helper, an indispensable prop for Marlow’s whole enterprise, is referred by the English manager as “a wandering trader”, a “pestilential fellow”, “that scoundrel”, as has been mentioned, and “an example of unfair competition” (Conrad 90-91). Such strong language can be at least partly explained by prejudices against half-castes: they provide visible evidence of unsavoury sexual entanglements involved in the colonial enterprise. The reader may react quite differently. Varying interpretations, attesting to the interest aroused by the puzzling character, have been attributed to the harlequin, as in studies by J. W. Canario (225), E. K. Yoder (90), J. Verleun (219) and J. Helder (368). The four scholars see him, respectively, as a modern representation of the European aborigine, a representative of the chthonian spirit of the underworld, an idealistic dupe, and a deformed simpleton devoid of moral sense. The first view agrees with the line adopted in this essay. In the light of cultural studies, the harlequin, with his mixed ancestry and his motley appearance, may indeed be taken as a figure not only of European, but of modern culture in general – a fictional anticipation of Michel Serres’ allegorical harlequin in *Le Tiers-Instruit*, emblematic of the contemporary, inevitably hybrid, cultural subject. As a matter of fact, is there any time when culture, especially dominant—or hegemonic, if preferred—culture, has not been hybrid?

In the earlier novel, *Almayer’s Folly*, hybridity, embodied in Nina Almayer, stays put where Western ethnocentric thought will usually have it— in a far off place, safely away from hegemonic cultures. Much more interestingly, *Heart of Darkness* places hybridity, represented by the harlequin, where colonial ideology would hardly see it— in the very heart of the Empire. The half-caste in fact proves close to three Conradian characters: first to Nina Almayer, in *Almayer’s Folly*, and ultimately to Marlow, the main narrator, and to Kurtz himself in *Heart of Darkness*. In this connection, Conrad’s first novel and his first masterpiece nod to each other in mutually illuminating references, as fictional premonitions of the key postcolonial category of hybridity.

Hybridity and the Theory of Culture

The importance of the concept can hardly be exaggerated. In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said called it “the essential idea for the revolutionary realities of today” (317). As a matter of fact, hybridity has long loomed as one of the central subjects for anthropologists and scientists in general, as studied in R. J. C. Young. Briefly summed up, Young’s long scholarly discussion puts forth a definition of the hybrid as the product of cultural interaction through language and sex (Young 6). Scarcely used till the nineteenth century, the term then referred to a physiological phenomenon. In our own time, it has been reactivated to describe a cultural category, prompting questions about the ways in which contemporary thought has broken with the racialized formulations of the past.

Among several others– the supposed infertility and alleged degeneration of the hybrid, for instance–Young mentions a problem for the supporters of the argument in favor of “pure” “superior” races. Did not Europe provide abundant examples of hybridism? Britain herself was made up of a mixture of Belgian, Kymric, Teutons, Danes and Normans. Young likewise cites Carl Vogt’s statement of 1863: “the Anglo-Saxon race are hybrids, yet, probably, not the worse for that” (Young 17). This was answered with the argument that the races remain distinct, in spite of being intermingled; they do not fuse, but live on separately, in a kind of natural apartheid.

Young also recalls the ideal of a living mixture that remains distinct, developed by Matthew Arnold into a theory of English culture as multicultural. Young, however, adds that today, “as the notion of the imperial bulldog ebbs away, commentators are again invoking hybridity to characterize contemporary culture” (Young 18). In this regard, the scholar’s stance is extremely cautious. Rejecting possible implications of a supposed fusion, which would favor a dominant race, Young mentions Bakhtin’s ideal of the undoing of authority in language through hybridization. He also recalls Homi Bhabha’s “astute move”, which shifts “this subversion of authority through hybridization to the dialogical situation of colonialism” and defines hybridity as “a problematic of colonial representation... that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other, denied knowledges, enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of authority” (321). Young additionally comments on Bhabha’s extension of the notion of hybridity to include forms of counter-authority, a “Third Space” which intervenes to effect the “hybrid moment of political change” (Young 112-3). Thus, while hybridity denotes a fusion, it also describes a dialectical articulation, as in Risjdoe’s “mongrelization”. Young finally mentions H. L. Gates Jr.’s theory of the ironizing double-voiced “trickster” discourse of the black literary tradition. Here one point of view is self-consciously layered as a palimpsest on – and against– another: the “Signifying Monkey” exploits what Voloshinov called the “inner dialectical quality of the sign” to produce a hybridized, critical speech (Young 24).

The Racial Question in *Almayer's Folly*

The several questions discussed by Young provide a conceptual framework for the interlocked categories of race and gender indispensable for a reading of *Almayer's Folly*. Predictably, the racial question proves central. The novel invokes a dense social mosaic, made up of Europeans from different countries, as well as Arabs, Malays, and inland Dyaks, allegedly head-hunters. This brings up their respective cultures and religions– the Balinese prince's Brahmanism, two forms of Islam, two forms of Christianity, totemism – all throwing their hostile, panoptic gazes upon one another. Successive rings of imaginary inferiority explain the way the Dutch colonial rulers make a joke of Almayer, who laughs at the Malay Lakamba, who derides his Arab rivals. The same principle operates at a personal level. Almayer despises his Indonesian wife, who, in turn, despises what she sees as his white man's weakness. The pattern tediously repeats itself in the crisscross of mutually demeaning voices.

The racial question also provides the key to plot solutions. Almayer helps his daughter to run away with her lover Dain only to escape the humiliation of letting the Dutch officers realize her union with a native. As he tearfully puts it: "I am a white man, and of good family ... It would be a disgrace ... white men finding my daughter with this Malay" (Conrad 184). Almayer's complaint is countered by Nina's resentment at the isolation to which her condition as a half-breed has condemned her at school. Because of this rejection, the young woman, like her mother, resists being Europeanized by her convent education. She rejects her upbringing, "returns scorn for scorn, contempt for contempt, hate for hate" (Conrad 179).

The shadow of race falls even between mother and daughter, as it does between man and wife. "You speak like a fool of a white woman", the Malay mother once tells Nina (Conrad 147). Race likewise stands between Dain and Nina, partly explaining their mutual attraction, especially the Balinese prince's fascination for "that woman who half belonged to his enemies" (Conrad 172). Dain hardly ever thinks of his beloved without associating her with the emblematic white dress she always seems to wear. One of the basic ideas in Young's study comes out here: theories of race are also covert theories of desire (Young 9). Culture is always lacking; there is no effacing the desire for the cultural Other (Young 3).

Conrad's Ideological Ambivalence

Colonial desire, the ancestral longing for the eroticized other, underlies Nina Almayer's love story, as it does the attraction she exerts over her father's Dutch guests and over Reshid, an Arab suitor. In this respect, Conrad's ideological ambivalence is notorious. Often praised by his non-racist representations of alterity, he has always been accused of racism, by Chinua Achebe, for instance. A perusal of *Almayer's Folly* supports both views. Twenty-four occurrences of the adjective "savage" attributed to non-white characters can be traced to the narrators' voices– a piece of narrative naiveté absent, it must be said, from the

infinitely subtler strategies of *Heart of Darkness*. This equates Conrad's Indonesians with European representations of cultural others as untutored, backward creatures– *analphabétiques*, in Montaigne's famous phrase– virgin pages to be written upon by the colonizer's history. In *Almayer's Folly*, the implied narrator's prejudice likewise appears in his countless, comically contemptuous references to Babalatchi, the Rajah's omnipresent go-between. The same might be said of the frequent allusions to Nina's Malay mother as a witch, both in the narrator's and in the other characters' voices. The figure of the witch brings to mind the multiform monsters constructed by European discourse as validating devices for violent conquest. Pre-Adamic natives, they would have been condemned to monstrosity, had it not been for the redeeming intervention of the European conqueror – or so the colonizer's discourse goes. Again, the infinitely more complex fabric of *Heart of Darkness* disallows this representation, partly redeeming Conrad's fiction from accusations of racism. The terrifying cannibal figure is undermined, for instance, by Marlow's native carriers. Assumedly cannibals, they outnumber their white masters thirty to five. However, even as they suffer the pangs of lingering starvation, Marlow's "hungry and forbearing friends" (Conrad 108) refrain from eating the whites. They anticipate modern doubts about the actual existence of cannibal tribes, voiced by W. Arens and P. Hulme, among others. For Arens and Hulme, theories about cannibals lack the necessary rigor, having always relied on indirect sources and hearsay reports.

The Collusion of Race and Gender in *Almayer's Folly*

Conrad's first novel bears witness to the old collusion of race, gender and social group, as a triple strategy of oppression that articulates colonial discourse. There is no ignoring the implied narrator's misogynistic voice, referring, for instance, to a supposedly "unscrupulous greediness of women who cling desperately to the very scraps and rags of love" (Conrad 193). Male resentment against women's attempts to reach for power thorough seduction is equally obvious. On the double grounds of race and gender, the seemingly ridiculous, but in fact politically sophisticated Babalatchi, disapproves of Nina as a "woman who, being half white, is ungovernable" (Conrad 129). The Rajah's *factotum* argues how "unsatisfactory" it was to have women mixed up in state affairs. Young women, of course. For Mrs. Almayer's mature wisdom and for the easy aptitude in intrigue that comes with years to the feminine mind, he alleges "the most sincere respect" (Conrad 133). That is, to Babalatchi's mind women's traffic in a man's world can be tolerated only after age has, so to speak, deprived them of their sexual power, compensating that by the acquisition of political cunning, otherwise seen as man's own exclusive gift.

Nina's mother is no stranger to this kind of reasoning. Only, seeing it from the other side of the sexual fence, she fully endorses seduction as a woman's legitimate weapon– the only one, we may add, available to her in those places and times. The Malay mother turns her last meeting with her daughter into a lesson in sexual politics. Recalling her subjection, on grounds of race and gender, to a white "man

who has no courage and no wisdom" (Conrad 148), the old woman instructs her daughter in how to become her future master's mistress. She thus hopes to make up for the fact that she herself had been unable to marry her captor Lingard, the great "Rajah Laut": she had nourished a hope of finding favor in his eyes and ultimately becoming his "wife, counselor, and guide" (Conrad 22). That dream failed, the mother tries to teach her daughter how to win and keep power through love and cunning, even at the price of tolerating the husband's infidelity: "there will be other women" in later years, the mother warns Nina, for Dain "is a great chief" and "such things must be" (Conrad 53). This lesson in resignation reflects Mrs. Almayer's reluctant acceptance of the local brand of patriarchy. The lesson initially meets with Nina's resistance, which the mother attributes to the daughter's half-whiteness. But the seemingly ingenuous and docile young woman finally absorbs her mother's advice, as revealed by the unfolding plot. Dutiful daughter of a revengeful mother, Nina cunningly begins to shape her lover Dain into "a god for others to worship"; meanwhile, however, she smiles her mysterious "smile of triumph, or of conscious power, or of tender pity, or, perhaps, of love" (Conrad 172).

Nina appears equally adept at assimilating her mother's most ambitious plan: to turn Dain's love into a weapon against the white conqueror's well-known formula of conquest, "prayers on their lips and loaded guns in their hands" (153). She learns her mother's lesson so quickly that even Almayer, her distracted father, cannot fail to discern his daughter's half-conscious plans to use Dain "as a tool of some incomprehensible ambition" (Conrad 180). Nina's engagement in a simultaneously sexual, racial and political war comes out in her words to her father: "I have been rejected with scorn by the white people and now I am a Malay. [Dain] took me in his arms, he laid his life at my feet. He is brave; he will be powerful, and I hold his bravery and his strength in my hand and I shall make him great" (Conrad 180). At this stage the girl in white has fully embraced her mother's plans for the expulsion of colonizers from Indonesia.

In this connection, the fact that Dain comes from Bali is instructive. As C. Geertz comments in *Negara*, the island south of Borneo and east of Java remained remarkably independent of the rest of Indonesia. Largely because of its commercial isolation, Bali evaded Dutch rule into 1849. The Balinese were regarded as among the proudest and most graceful people of the Archipelago. This helps explain why Nina sees her Balinese prince as the ideal Malay chief of her mother's tradition—"reckless, ferocious, ready with a flashing kriss for his enemies" (Conrad 64). He proves most suitable to father her child. By brave deeds, the young woman hopes, their child will restore the splendor of their people's past. Dain's son will fulfill Nina's mother's revenge, so that the old woman can live to see "the white men driven from the islands" (Conrad 152).

Caliban's Children: Malinche's Revenge

Differently put, Conrad's first novel looks back to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. As Prospero accuses him of having attempted to rape Miranda, Caliban does not

refute the charge. He admits he would have liked to consummate the rape in order to people the island with little Calibans. Together with their father, they would have driven the invader away from the island, as in Nina's mother's dream. No doubt shared by all subjected people, this dream reverts back to legends associating the founding of nations with the rape of women, like the Sabines, mothers of Rome, and Lucrece, whose sacrifice led to the expulsion of the Etruscan kings and the founding of the Roman republic. In *Interpretações da América Latina*, Augusto Tamayo Vargas cites Otávio Paz's related notion of a Latin American "Malinche complex" – an allusion to Malinche, the Nashua woman from the Mexican Gulf Coast, who played a crucial role in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. She acted as an interpreter, mistress and intermediary for the Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortez. Malinche came to symbolize the "violated mother", emblematic of the conquest of the Americas. According to Paz, what she recalls is not a mere historical process, but a violation perpetrated on the very flesh of women in colonized countries (Vargas 461).

Nina Almayer's double subversion – a rejection of both sexual and racial colonial discourse – represents what might be called Malinche's revenge. Having found her Caliban, Nina is ready to bear his children, future avengers of conquered lands and violated native women. She can herself be seen as a female projection of the Caliban figure, who variously subverts the traditional pattern. First, she belies the alleged sterility of the hybrid. Unlike so many barren mulatto heroines in fiction (studied by Teófilo de Queiroz Júnior in *Preconceito de cor e a mulata na Literatura Brasileira*, and by Heloisa Toller Gomes in *As marcas da escravidão*), she bears a healthy son. She is also revolutionary in another respect: she contradicts the unilateral process of conquest, which couples men of the dominating group with women of the dominated one. Reversing this pattern, Nina stands for the weaker gender but the stronger race.

She becomes the mother of Caliban's children, who will hopefully chase the white people from the islands. This explains Nina's mother's wild joy – contrasted with her father's murderous fury – when the news of a grandson reaches the couple's village. Original purity, warlike greatness will be restored to the race of "giants who had lost faith in their strength" (Conrad, 165) – or so the new born boy's parents believe. Yet the question remains: will Nain's heir really drive the invaders away? And will Nina, a half-breed brought up as a Christian, totally erase her white inheritance to become the Malay Ranee? Does the implied narrator unreservedly endorse the happy end of the novel? The critical reader may wonder. For, however much she may choose to present herself as a Malay, Nina remains white in many respects. She cannot help being a half-caste. The novel leaves no doubt that her being partly white – symbolized by the colour of the dress she constantly wears – largely explains her attraction for Dain.

That Nina cannot totally obliterate her white inheritance is made clear in the scene where she first expresses her love by kissing Dain in the mouth. As she does so, she is resorting to her "reminiscence of that despised and almost forgotten civilization", looking for "a sign of love, the fitting expression of the boundless felicity

of the present, the pledge of a bright and splendid future”(Conrad 72). This caress, the text implies, is unknown in the Malay lovemaking tradition. Dain, in turn, is “surprised and frightened at the storm raised in his breast by the strange and to him hitherto unknown contact” (Conrad 72). Thus Nina’s kiss, which carries the mark of the culture she consciously despises, bears the germ of the white woman’s infectious culture. It bodes both happiness and danger. As it announces the birth of her people’s avenger, it is the kiss of life. But it is also the kiss of death, taking the virus of a hated civilization to infect Dain’s comparatively untainted culture. The kiss partly promises the fulfilling of the witch-like mother’s dream, the white man’s expulsion from the islands. But it also keeps the stamp of his indelible seal. Emblematically, the ambiguity of Nina’s kiss, which seals her alliance with the future leader of an anti-colonialist rebellion, signals the fact that colonial exploitation does not come to an end. It goes on, under the shape of new dependencies and asymmetries.

The Futility of the Quest for a Mythical Original Purity

The question persists. Is Nina’s double rebellion really feasible? Can she erase what has been written upon her by her Western upbringing? Is her conscious adoption of a freely chosen racial and cultural identity so easily achieved as her symptomatic rejection of the English language? In other words, is the retrieval of lost, archaic forms, possible? The answer is not so positive as the happily ending love story seems to imply. Nina’s partial whiteness seems ineradicable. This emerges again in the final scene of her departure, when she begins to cry. As her puzzled lover turns to Almayer for an explanation for her tears, the father answers: “you will see them more than once” (Conrad 188). Nina’s tears betray the white woman she cannot wholly discard in herself. Dain realizes that. He is “conscious of something in her he could not understand ... something invisible that stood between them ... She was his, and yet she was like a woman from another world ... No desire, no longing, no effort of will or length of life could destroy this vague feeling of their difference” (187).

Nor can the memory of his half-caste daughter fade from Almayer’s heart. Having followed “his skin” and not “his heart” in disavowing her, he is determined to forget her (Conrad 192). He can in fact “erase all traces of Nina’s footsteps from the sand” (Conrad 195), as he watches the lovers’ canoe disappear in the distance. But forget her he cannot, at least not until opium turns him into a shadow of himself, “an immense man-doll broken and flung there out of the way” (Conrad 204). Almayer’s inability to forget his half-caste daughter—like hers to discard her half-white self—argues for the impossibility, in an irrecoverably hybridized world, to do away with the Other, both within and without oneself. As Clifford puts it: “there is no going back, no essence to redeem” (4). The birth of Nina and Dain’s child may, however, point to another, hopeful way. It may signal the instauration of what Bhabha calls “an agonic process, in which the seeming authority and certainties of colonial discourse are subverted, questioned and destabilized”(Bhabha 120).

As a matter of fact, the notion of the impossibility of the return to a mythical unity and purity already pervades the first chapter of *Heart of Darkness*. About to start the tale of his attempted voyage, Marlow projects a visible image of hybridity. This image, almost of a symbolic meeting of East and West, shows the character-narrator sitting on a cruising yawl on the Thames, in London, the very centre of hegemonic Europe, in the heyday of colonialism: “with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower” (Conrad 50). Confronted with this image– lotus flower and European dress blended together– the reader is reminded that, when he goes to Africa, Marlow finds his double in another hybrid figure, the ambiguous harlequin. So, ironically, his voyage proves cyclical. He seems to have travelled to another continent only to meet the hybrid that, unknowingly, already existed in himself. His experience seems to anticipate Grewal and Kaplan’s reflections: “Western culture is itself, as is every cultural formation, a hybrid something. Yet the dominant Western attitude toward hybridity is that it is always elsewhere or it is infiltrating an identity or location that is assumed to be, to have always been, pure and unchanging” (7-8).

The Threefold Image of Hybridity in *Heart of Darkness*

At the end of his journey, speaking from his boat on the Thames, Marlow has learned his lesson. Like “all men who have “followed the sea with reverence and affection”, he is able to evoke “the great spirit of the past” (Conrad 47) with its succession of invading peoples. Buddha-like, he deals the death blow to the ingenuous belief of characters like the Nina of *Almayer’s Folly*, who still hope to find archaic survival; he nods his approval for the ongoing process of hybridization which has always presided at the meeting of cultures. Not unexpectedly for the contemporary reader, Marlow’s search reveals something, which, unaware of the fact, he has always had, inseparable from himself: the hybridity revealed in his pose and dress. They seem to cry out that collective identities are all hybrid, always relational and inventive, to be continuously re-imagined and re-invented as intercultural. This realization may be at the centre actually reached by Marlow, the only approachable heart in an otherwise impenetrable darkness. In short, this is what Marlow finds when he meets his double, the man in motley.

I have already discussed this puzzling figure, the pejorative light in which the “be-patched youth” is seen by the other characters, as well as his key role in the plot. Without him, Marlow would have been unable to fulfill his several missions, to find Kurtz or to meet the trader’s Intended in London, with all the perplexing questions raised by the visit. The man in motley also recalls another figure, the Shakespearean clown, a frequent invitation for reflection, like Touchstone or Lear’s fool. So also the man in motley may prefigure new perceptions of truth: hybrid, subversive forms of culture representation, certainly more in tune with our own times than with Conrad’s day. This makes the great novelist’s fiction somehow prophetic of a vision tantalizingly beckoning between his lines. There,

perhaps, lies one of the possible answers to the interpretive challenge of *Heart of Darkness*, which, after the lapse of over a century, keeps on intriguing its readers. (We may here remember Harold Bloom's words as he calls the novel "a critical background" (3). The imaginative projection of all cultures as inescapably mongrel, doubly represented by the harlequin and by the "Buddha in European clothes", may largely contribute to the intriguing effect of the novel and to its cryptically subversive representation of Western culture. Conrad's novel hints at an awareness of hybridization as a consequence of colonialism. This awareness, as Bhabha points out in *The Location of Culture*, may lead to important changes in perspective, to a "disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority" (Bhabha 114). In the Nina of *Almayer's Folly* Conrad embodies the rebellion of the historically muted subject, as well as the quest for essentialist memories of a nostalgic past. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow's awareness of the impossibility to reach the center nods to a more positive, even if hardly less elusive movement: towards a narrative that, in Bhabha's words, will let no culture "look at itself narcissistically in the eye" (251). Modern cultural discourses will have to face "an irretrievably plural space", from which to speak both of, and as the minoric, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent" (Bhabha 149). Nothing more precise need be said of the English Marlow, or of the ambivalently pictured harlequin, than what is revealed of Kurtz himself– the mysterious object of so much love, hatred, admiration and repulsion: "all Europe contributed to[his] making" (117). It would still be possible to connect the half-caste harlequin, as Clifford does, with "the young Korzeniowski, "who was shedding his official nationality to become Conrad." (Clifford 108). Recurring in Marlow, the seeker, as well as in Kurtz, the sought one, the harlequin also ultimately connects them with their creator. This multiple, unsettling representation evades stereotyped images of the conqueror as the carrier of knowledge as well as that of any culture as the holder of purity and truth. Sameness appears inseparable from otherness, announcing "a world where syncretism and parodic invention are becoming the rule rather than the exception (...) a multinational world of institutional transience" (Clifford 95). Moving all the time, definable by the tendency to move rather than by their precise direction, cultures and their representations keep on arousing "profound perplexity in the living" (Bhabha 167). It is this perplexity regarding representational truth that, in contrast with Conrad's comparatively naïve first novel, makes *Heart of Darkness* so fascinating. With its Chinese box narrative structure, within the multiple frame of its several narrators and its perpetually decentering movement, the novel exhibits what Douglas Brown has called Conrad's "structural skepticism". In this context, the harlequin figure proves, in Wilson Harris's apt phrase, "the central clown", who brings together heterogeneous elements in creative cross-fertilization (Harris 113). The clown inaugurates a kind of presage for the "multivocal exchanges occurring in the politically charged situations" (Clifford 10), a "restless, uneasy, interstitial hybridity: a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms" (Young 24).

Predictably, *Heart of Darkness* has inspired creative responses from postcolonial writers, rewritings like Ngugi wa Thiongo's *The River Between* and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. So also, in *Journey through Darkness* Peggy Nightingale (3) discusses V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* as a rewriting of *Heart of Darkness*. She argues that Conrad also preceded Naipaul's fictionalization of the converse effect of colonialism, pictured in Kurtz's turning from idealism to materialism, from humanity to brutality.

I myself add that by suggesting the association of Kurtz, the Harlequin and Marlow with hybridism, Conrad also proves a prophet of contemporary cultural theorists' involvement with this crucial topic. *Heart of Darkness* thus remains a tantalizingly provoking text, as well as a unique proto-postcolonial and modernist novel.

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