"Conrad's 'The Lagoon': A Study" – Dr. Avijit Basak

"The Lagoon" is Conrad's third short story, written along with "The Idiots" and "An Outpost of Progress." It was first published in August 1896 in the *Cornhill Magazine,* earning him 12 pounds and 10 shillings. He composed the story responding to an invitation by the *Cornhill* soliciting "'short stories from Conrad stipulating a general rule' of '6000 or 8000 words' and offering a 'remuneration' of 'one guinea' for every page 'about 450 words'." Conrad composed these stories to make quick money using the vogue of the short story. "The represent his earliest experiments in the 'several ways of telling a tale'" (Keith Carabine, "Introduction," viii).

Conrad, during the composition of the short story, wrote to Garnett that the story is essentially about and set in Malay, "containing 'the usual forests river – stars – wind sunrise . . . and lots of scondhand Conradese'." Rightly observes that "it taps and stimulates the late-Victorian appetite for the exotic so expertly fostered by Stevenson and Kipling. The two violent, melodramatic tales of tribal conflict, passionate love, and betrayal, told by Malay warriors to white listeners, delighted Conrad's reviewers because they juxtaposed opposing racial cultures, instincts and beliefs and 'brought the East to our very doors' (Sherry, *The Critical Heritage*, 110)" (Keith Carabine, "Introduction" x). "The Lagoon" talks of different shades of passion and love that transcend the bounds of conventional values, challenging it continuously with transgressive frontiers, negotiating the violence of filial and domestic tragedy, where a sense of betrayal and failure within the troubled psyche of a warrior triggers the narrative force (Najder, *Joseph Conrad* 207).

The story opens with an unnamed character, referred to as "the white man," underscoring the racial profile. The reference to Arsat's clearing immediately introduces the protagonist and his geo/political location. Already cornered and relegated to a lagoon, the white man ironically mentions the "clearing" as if Arsat affords an open space. The tone of the white man is also worth noting here. The Malay subordinate "grunted" at the decision, but the superior white man could not be contradicted. It can also mean that the white man is not aware of the geographical/spatial reality of his own colony. The poetic description of the scene ahead, with the twilight rays of the sun reflecting on the river, is replete with premonitory and ominous significations. The richness of symbolism positions the text in the crepuscular dimension that an ironist employs to heighten the double-edged ambiguity expected from such an artist. Even though the text opens by mentioning a "clearing" and the river itself "flows straight into the sea, flows straight to the east" with "the freedom of an

open horizon," the river does not witness any motion, a symbol of progress and life, recalling the title of the story that Conrad had immediately written before "The Lagoon," "An Outpost of Progress," which explores the colonial devastation wrought by the Europeans in the Congo, predating "Heart of Darkness."

The description of the river and its surroundings prepares us for the muted violence that is about to follow. The forest is described as "sombre and dull," standing "motionless and silent." The muddy banks of the river are full of enormous trees, but they "hung unstirring over the brown swirl of eddies." The reigning "stillness" seems to have "bewitched" the surroundings "into an immobility perfect and final," culminating in "the breathless silence of the world." The water, churned up due to the splashing of the paddles by the boatmen, is frothy. Conrad points towards the gaze of the white man and seems to have described the river from his colonial perspective, especially when he says

> ". . . the white man's canoe, advancing upstream in the short-lived disturbance of its own making, seemed to enter the portals of a land from which the very memory of motion had forever departed."

The third paragraph continues with the imagistic world-building that controls the mood of the story. The setting sun, twilight darkness, from the dazzling sunlight of the second paragraph, not only portrays the canoe's progress towards Arsat's clearing, but also shows the heart of darkness beneath the sovereign's power. The east, to which the river flows headlong, is described as harbouring "both light and darkness," but as we read on, we see how superficial this construct from an occidental projection of oriental lightness is, leaving only darkness to the tangible understanding of the whites, or a lack thereof.

The following descriptions are equally disturbing. The canoe is described as a "slim and amphibious creature leaving the water for its lair in the forests." The creek is described as "tortuous, dabulously deep; filled with gloom under the thin strip of pure and shining blue of heaven." This curious description is not only orientalist in tone, but, I argue, is heavily inspired by *Paradise Lost* and its description of Hell and Satan. Once this is established, the white man himself becomes Satan incarnate, Lucifer, the bright angel. The long lines of simile further help us to connect "The Lagoon" with *Paradise Lost*. The boat that the white man rides is not only just another amphibious creature, but it is a beast in disguise. Milton has compared Satan to such a slimy creature in *Paradise Lost,* which, although not an amphibious creature, is a sea-serpent, Leviathan. Immediately, of course, Conrad revises his imagery to

bolster this intertextual reconstruction further when he describes the roots of tall trees around and in the river as “arrested snake,” “black and dull, writhing and motionless.” This entire paragraph teems with verbal associations to darkness. The roots of the trees are black, creating a “sombre walls of vegetation,” and “Darkness oozed out from between the trees . . . the darkness, mysterious and invincible; the darkness scented and poisonous of impenetrable forests.” This vegetation is, contrary to popular imagination, lifeless, as we have already noted, with motionless, “unstirring leaves.” The house of Arsat appears “black in the distance” with “two tall nibong palms,” an extension of the forest the white man travelled through, leaning “slightly over the ragged roof, with a suggestion of sad tenderness and care.” It is quite clear that the road to Arsat, for the white man, is a road to hell where darkness is visible.

It is not difficult to confuse the narrative voice here with Conrad’s, especially if we consider the tale as having autobiographical elements, but the sublimation and subsuming of the narrative voice remains unclear if we consider the ironic note of these initial descriptions which help us to chart the psychological landscape of a coloniser’s gaze rather than the perspective of the Malay subaltern who remains silent except the grunt he uses to express his displeasure. The Malay subordinates, steeped in their local prejudices, do not like Arsat either. The European values do not have much relevance to the colonial subjects who have been subjected to the same white masters. They dislike Arsat not only as a stranger, even though he is also a Malay who has become stranger (the opposite to Kurtz’s going native) by not following local customs and eloping with a foreigner who does not share their religion and is a representative of European colony, but also because of his act of repairing a ruined house to live in, which, for them, means “that he is not afraid to live amongst the spirits that haunt the places abandoned by mankind. Such a man can disturb the course of fate by glances or words; while his familiar ghosts are not easy to propitiate by casual wayfarers upon whom they long to wreak the malice of their human master.” Even though the white man does not believe in such eastern beliefs, Arsat, unwittingly, earns the enmity of both. Ironically, Conrad compares the white man immediately with the “Father of Evil,” colonialism itself, and without doubt, Satan, “who leads them unharmed through the invisible dangers of this world,” “they” being the Malay followers. Conrad, as an ironist, is clearly present when he adds, “To the warnings of the righteous they oppose an offensive pretence of disbelief.” What is right and what is righteous is decided by the political reality of the day.

The faint possibility that perhaps the narrator's pov is somehow the pov of Conrad is undercut the moment when Conrad writes that the analogy with the Father of Evil and the rest of it is what the Malays, who are Muslims (evidenced by their invocation of Allah's name), think of the white man. However, this haunting dimension of ghostliness, ruin, lifelessness, lack of generative motion, and growth in the backdrop of a transgressive love story is Conrad's initial experiment with an allegory of evil and demoniality, which he further explored in *Heart of Darkness*. The late Victorian fascination with otherworldly creatures and the anxiety about the colony's boomerang effect on the English psyche, as well as a possible recolonial revenge, are explored in such texts. The colonised, in their disdain and deliberate fostering of local beliefs and customs, heighten not only their differentiality, but also their individuality, which colonial practices fail to alter or change.

The first thing that Arsat asks when he appears in the scene is for medicine; he expects modern medical help from the white man, Tuan, a colonial-European import. However, the colonial masters were not there in the colony to help the colonised, and the white man is here to seek revenge for the transgression committed by Arsat, and not to help him. Arsat's beloved is gravely ill; her "cheeks were sunk slightly, her lips were partly open, and on the young face there was the ominous and fixed expression – the absorbed, contemplating expression of the unconscious who are going to die." In her comatose situation, Diamelen does not recognise anyone, nor does she respond to calls. The fatal colonial malaise, powerfully present in *Heart of Darkness*, is also shown here as an infectious and paralytic disease affecting the whites as punishment for their transgression.

The white man and Arsat have been friends and fellow warriors in the past; however, the friendship has its own graded dimension – it is not between equals but between a man and a being less than his "favourite dog." Arsat and Diamelen both live lonely lives, feared as well, probably due to Arsat's fame as a fighter and his strangeness, which stems from his transgressive affair with a ruined woman and a ruined home. They are also lonely due to their location in an enclosed space within the lagoon, where they are alone and isolated. Arsat's fear of Diamelen's certain and impending death, of which he asks the white man to find a trace of probable deniability, germinates not only from his deep love but also out of the compounding sense of loneliness and bereftness that seem to be his destiny after her death. He suffers from survivor's guilt, blaming his fate for Diamelen's physical condition, associating one death with another, that of his brother. This double blow heightens his trauma, and he naturally seeks an integrative solace by looking back into his memory space to

escape the current fragmented state of emotional distress. However, Conrad continues to impose ominous imageries and analogies on the readers; in their repetitiveness and tautological presence, these imageries help build an atmosphere of boredom and helplessness. "The fire in the shampan shone faintly . . . Then it died out . . . The voices ceased. The land and the water lay invisible, still and silent. It was as though there had been nothing left in the world but the glitter of stars streaming, ceaseless and vain, through the black stillness of the night." The next paragraph helps us understand the hellish underworld, the inferno, that Conrad tries to build here, ominously recalling the world of *Heart of Darkness*

> The white man gazed straight before him into the darkness with wide-open eyes. The fear and fascination, the inspiration and the wonder of death – of death near, unavoidable, and unseen, soothed the unrest of his race and stirred the most indistinct, the most intimate of his thoughts. The ever-ready suspicion of evil, the gnawing suspicion that lurks in our hearts, flowed out into the stillness round him – into the stillness profound and dumb, and made it appear untrustworthy and infamous like the placid and impenetrable mask of an unjustifiable violence. In that fleeting and powerful disturbance of his being the earth unfolded in the starlight peace became a shadowy country of inhuman strife, a battle-field of phantoms terrible and charming, august or ignoble, struggling ardently for the possession of our helpless hearts. An unquiet and mysterious country of inextinguishable desires and fears.

The "plaintive murmur" with which the next paragraph begins approximates ululation of the Greek tragedies; the murmur is "saddening and startling, as if the great solitudes of surrounding woods had tried to whisper into his ear the wisdom of their immense and loft indifference." Yet, the sound sounds "hesitating and vague" until they turn into words and "flowed in gently in a murmuring stream of soft and monotonous sentences." The spell of monotony breaks with the impact of a new beginning – as if the white man wakes up from his momentary lapse of nostalgia and attachment. The "changing position" in this context assumes a deeper and greater significance.

The story, from the perspective of a Malayan rebel tribal hero, is a tale of "war and love," and he firmly believes that seeking danger as an adventurer, relinquishing comfort, might help him earn sympathy from the white man. His appeal to him to bear witness when he says "A writing may be lost; a lie may be written; but what the eye had seen is truth and remans in the mind" is not only a plea after his realisation that his fellow warrior has come here to encounter him, but also an attempt at justifying his transgression, and a quiet

acceptance of his fate embedded in the double death, and debt, of loyalty and love. The white man is unfamiliar with the fight for love, which prompts Arsat to speak to him about it. "Speak before the night and love are gone" is a distant echo of Othello's "Put out the light" monologue in Shakespeare's tragedy. It is deceptive to consider the association of daylight with "sorrow" and "shame," even after what Arsat says; it is his fear of seeing himself in his emotional worst, which, as a warrior, he would not have appreciated.

The nocturnal monologue to "lay down the heaviness of our trouble . . . in a friend's heart" is a confession of guilt. Even though "The Lagoon" primarily is a tale of transgressive love between two hapless lovers, there is an undercurrent of loyalty, commitment, and responsibility to other kinds of love. It is essentially a story of tribal bonding where Arsat and Diamelen's relationship assumes a partial role; a more significant impact is embedded, once the story is understood in its cultural context, in the male bonding in an essentially patriarchal ambiance. The story talks of clans, tribal wars, strict rules controlling their lives, a chain of command, and unquestioning subjecthood. It is important to note that even though the white man is a professional mercenary, Arsat's loyalty to his king, Si Dendring, is because of a tribal bonding, where there is an implied exchange of service in lieu of welfare despotism. The continual presence of threats to the kingdom also led to a hedonistic time of peace, and we can trace in this carnivalesque time the root of the affair between Arsat and Dialmelen. Inchi Midah, whose relation with Si Dendrig is ambiguous and unclear, assumes significance because in this chauvinistic world, she holds and yields great influence, and therefore, her impending death is certain to bring about unpredictable changes. Fearing certain unmentioned consequences, Arsat decides to elope with Diamelen, who is not only an attendant to the mortally sick Inchi Midah but is also much valued by the Ruler himself. All these interpersonal relationships, which do not include Arsat, are not clarified and explained by Conrad, making it harder for the readers to ascertain sexual jealousy as the motif of different actions that take place in the course of the action, even though it appears to be the most plausible reasoning. In this passage, as romantically recalled by Arsat, the vegetation and the floral world again get an important role to play, where they are shown to have borne communicative agency, further heightening their symbolic importance: "Unseeing, we spoke to one another through the scent of flowers, through the veil of leaves, through the blades of long grass that stood still before our lips . . ."

The tribal force and code of conduct that control the world-view of Arsat is clearly discernible in the text. Definitionally, tribes are formed based on strict rules, and a vigilant

imposition of and adherence to such laws are important parts of the formation of tribes, in lieu of which the tribe helps its individual members. Any deviance and transgression are punished with severity and often with expulsion; excommunication and banishment are other forms of punishment. Therefore, Arsat's decision to relocate himself to a remote lagoon does not appear out of context; rather, it shows that, as an involved member of his tribe, he is well aware of the corollary of his action. The fact that, inspite of this, he decides to elope with Diamelen by challenging the reach of his king at once shows his deep affection for his beloved, and his bravado as a tribal warrior. Arsat does not appear as much concerned about the wrath of his king as he is about the inherent sense of betrayal where he is denounced by the tribe he was an allegiant to and the brother he literally sells down the river.

Arsat shows awareness of his hubris when he confesses, "We are of a people who take what they want," but immediately underscores the colonial implication of such an attitude of mind when he adds "like you whites;" the patriarchy that controls imperialism and imperiousness is thus conflated: "We are men who take what we want and can hold it against many." Undoubtedly, Arsat's love for Diamelen can not be discarded as a justification here, whereas colonialism is not a product of love; however, a utilitarian motive hinged on love and care has always been a part of the colonial narrative to exert domination over others. Love does not justify thoughtlessness, something that Arsat would soon realise after the tragedy befalls.

Arsat and his brother decide to flee with Diamelen together. Their brotherhood, it is important to note, is an extension of tribal affinity where togetherness harnesses the power with which the tribe exercises its control. Conrad's ironic style mimics the tribal practice of affiliation in this scene, where betrayal and brotherhood work together to show how uncritical practice is infested with inherent paradoxes and is headed to doom. This foreshadows the mature narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, and is honed in Conrad's earlier tales. The assimilationist attitude of the tribal identity, where one stands for all and all for one, is clearly delineated when Arsat's brother says, "You shall take her from their midst. We are two who are like one." When Arsat elopes with Diamelen at an opportune moment one night, with the help of his brother, it further highlights the clandestine nature of their affair, which goes against the bravado of heroism, as Arsat is aware of when he says, "We should have taken her in daylight." The act of elopement immediately turns them into fugitives, people who deserve banishment: "We are cast out and this boat is our country now – and the sea is our refuge," as Arsat's brother reflects. In the absence of the benevolence of their king and the

recognition of their tribe, the fugitives are homeless and hopeless: “We had no more friends in the country of our birth.” The wide-open sea offers directional disorientation where the future is unseeable in the darkness. Arsat is extra gentle with Diamelen because he is aware of their predicament, with jarring, ambiguous, and heroic words of consolation, which show his vulnerability: “I take you from those people. You came to the cry of my heart, but my arms take you into my boat against the will of the great.” The striking use of “those people” not only shows the dissociation achieved by this act of travesty, but it also distinguishes the lovers, especially Diamelen, from the warrior faction. The distinction is pronounced with the introduction of the feminine figure, who stands as an anomaly in the universe of the story, where the other female figure, Inchi Midah, is also highly politically active and influential. When the brother tells Arsat “There is half a man in you now – the other half is in that woman. I can wait. When you are a whole man again, you will come back again with me here to shout your defiance. We are the sins of the same mother,” we realise the precise role of women in that patriarchal warrior tribe is limited to giving birth to brave sons, where women do not play any role to bring in changes in the socio-political fabric. They can, as the brother says, “neither run nor fight” and could only thrall men with love. Diamelen, in this sense, stands as an outsider who could forge only a temporary bond, as the brother implies. Her death, thus, becomes an act in a necessary initiation ritual for Arsat to trace his roots, when he was a fighter, and to restart his career as an avenger, forced by cosmic and fated events. He could realise that he is haunted by his past, not only by the traditional compulsion pursuing him in his tragedy, but also by the memory of his brother. The death of Diamelen makes sense to him only in a double narrative of his brother’s sacrifice. As a trauma text, “The Lagoon” works in the poetics of what theorists call a “double blow” where the recent tragedy sheds light on a tragic past, creating a comparative textual loop where past haunts the present and vice versa. This connection of events compounds Arsat’s grief even more. As Zdzisław Najder observes, Conrad’s catholic upbringing has been a palpable influence on his confessional texts; the confessional nature of these early texts, where the protagonist confesses to a guilt-ridden and troubling past, in a sense, reenacts the ritual of the confession of a justified sinner in search of a sympathetic and absolving soul (*Conrad in Perspective*, Najder 142)

The transgressive nature of Arsat’s affair is clearly delineated when he reflects “. . . I longed to be with her in a safe place beyond the reach of men’s anger and of women’s spite. My love was so great, that I thought it could guide me to a country where death was unknown

. . . .” This logic of death-defying adventure, so natural for a fighter, and yet at odds with the nature of his job, contemplated on as a response to his brother’s words, is ironically unspoken by Arsat as it anticipates the impending death of his brother to save the lovers. They get closer to their destination, and as they decide to take rest for the night on land, they hear their attackers inching closer to them. As it dawns on Arsat’s brother a sacrifice is necessary, being the bravest man in the realm who “knew not fear and no fatigue” he decides to save his brother and his beloved. After dispatching them with precise instructions to run away and take a canoe waiting for them, he starts to fend off the attackers with limited firepower. As Arsat, ever the warrior, counts the shots, he realises that his brother has exhausted all his options. As they float the canoe, Arsat looks back and finds his fallen brother surrounded by the attackers. The brother calls for them: “I am coming;” but at that moment, his love for Diamelen gets the best of him. He pushes the boat without waiting for his brother. This marks the climax of his sense of guilt, for which he feels Diamelen’s fatal illness is the ordained punishment he has received. The entire confession teems with grief and motifs of confession:

> I heard him cry my name twice; and I heard voices shouting, 'Kill! Strike!' I never turned back. I heard him calling my name again with a great shriek, as when life is going out together with the voice – and I never turned my head. My own name! . . . My brother! Three times he called – but I was not afraid of life. Was she not there in that canoe? And could I not with her find a country where death is forgotten – where death is unknown!

Not responding to a salutation is in itself an act of killing, of erasing someone’s existence, which is embedded in uncaring and unrecognising, as Derrida would say. This deliberate effacement and defacement work like a denial of further human connection for Arsat; from now on, there is no going back. Diamelen becomes his sole anchor and solace, now on the verge of death, unleashing a sense of chaos, disorientation, and deprivation. The end of the confession to Tuan, who is obviously an agent of the king who killed his brother and is indirectly responsible for Diamelen’s death in isolation, Arsat feels drained and enraged. The symbolism in the following paragraph clearly marks the beginning of a darker time:

> Arsat rose and stood, an indistinct and silent figure above the dying embers of the fire. Over the lagoon a mist drifting and low had crept, erasing slowly the glittering images of the stars. And now a great expanse of white vapour covered the land: it flowed cold and gray in the darkness, eddied in noiseless whirls round the tree-trunks and about the platform of the house, which seemed to float upon a restless and

> impalpable illusion of a sea. Only far away the tops of the trees stood outlined on the twinkle of heaven, like a sombre and forbidding shore – a coast deceptive, pitiless and black.

Arsat's confession is an ardent record of his guilt and attempt at expiation. To have Diamelen, he would have fought with the world, and he loved his brother, as he claims, but at the same time, like a true tribal warrior, he adds "We all love our brothers," thereby not only generalising the fraternal weight of his crime but also recusing himself of particularity. Death, at the same time, is given a general heft of indifference when he says "What did I care who died? I wanted peace in my mind." This underscores the necessity of Diamelen's presence in his life; in a life of constant wars and uncertainty, Diamelen represents a sense of stability and calm, free from the bounds of fraternal commitments and delimitation. It is, therefore, quite ironic when Diamelen dies at this precise hour, symbolised by a "white eagle" taking "slanting and ponderous flight." The eagle not only stands for the soul of Diemelen, now free from burning, but also an act of letting go. Arsat is no longer bound by tribal affinity and domestic bliss. In the wake of the morning, Arsat wakes up as a new man and with a new mission. He no longer needs the dark of secrecy and hiding – he is now in the open, ready to perpetrate violence upon the violence that has reduced him to the status of a precarious refugee, bereft of earthly ties. The morning ushers in a twilight of rage and vengeance: "'No, Tuan' . . . 'I shall not eat or sleep in this house, but I must first see my road. Now I can see nothing – see nothing! There is no light and no peace in the world; but there is death – death for many. We were sons of the same mother – and I left him in the midst of enemies; but I am going back now.'" The intermingling of guilt and grief propels Arsat's future, as immediately he goes on to confess: "'In a little while I shall see clear enough to strike – to strike. But she has dies . . . now . . . darkness.'" The violence implied in Arsat'slast words searches for a vocabulary of an uncertain future, which, for a warrior, is difficult to frame apart from the language of violence that he inherits. It is this veneer that the white man fails to decode. Conrad's brilliant use of frame narration, where the white man's camera view controls our perspective, closes the text without giving us a closure, "The white man . . . looks back . . . Arsat had not moved. He stood lonely in the searching sunshine; and he looked beyond the great light of a cloudless day into the darkness of a world of illusions." This interpretation, even though it goes with the stated intention of Arsat, comes from the point of view of a professional mercenary, an emissary of the king who would, it is quite possible, keep the king apprised of the development, further contributing to the unequal war

that is subtly hinted at. Whereas Arsat's initial reaction is a grief-stricken emotional framing of the double blow acting out the sorrow while looking forward to work through it, for the white man, he appears confused and disillusioned. Arsat is anything but confused; he is undergoing an excruciating experience of agony, a whirlwind of conflicting emotions, but the white man, with his colonial gaze, finds him intellectually wanting. Conrad's subtle criticism of imperialism's lack of empathy is highlighted here, further preparing us for a cynical culmination in "Heart of Darkness."

Works Cited

Conrad, Joseph. *Selected Short Stories: Joseph Conrad*. Introduction by Keith Carabine, Wordsworth Classics, 1997.

Carabine, Keith. "Introduction." *Selected Short Stories: Joseph Conrad*. Wordsworth Classics, 1997.

Najder Zdzisław. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*. Rutgers University Press, 1983.

---. *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on art and fidelity*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.