

**Agnes S.K. Yeow, *Conrad's Eastern Vision: A Vain and Floating Appearance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 236 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-54529-8.**

There is much to commend in Agnes S.K. Yeow's recent book, *Conrad's Eastern Vision: A Vain and Floating Appearance*. It is thoroughly researched, lucidly written, and completely focused on its subject: the stories and novels Joseph Conrad wrote in which the Malay Archipelago is the setting. Making good use of recent Conrad criticism, poststructuralist approaches to texts, and her knowledge of the history and geography of the region, Yeow has provided us with fully contextualised, readable, fascinating, and nuanced readings of works such as *An Outcast of the Islands*, *Almayer's Folly*, and of course, *Lord Jim*. In the process, she manages to convince us not only of the "romance" that drew Conrad to fictionalise the region he had experienced on his own but of the way he problematised it in his narratives. Additionally, she tries to persuade us that "in the trajectory of Conrad's aesthetic development, there is clearly a 'Malayan' phase" in which he negotiated between art and history.

Yeow roots her analysis in ideas emanating mainly from Bakhtin and poststructuralist thought. Bakhtin enables her to see a Conrad who "tacitly acknowledges that fiction and history are dialogic and contesting voices." Another Bakhtinian idea that influences her is his concept of "the surplus of seeing" that allows one to understand that "fiction sees thing which history does not and vice versa." Poststructuralism enables her to perceive "Conrad's problematisation of art and history." However, she endeavours to stake a territory of her own in Conrad studies by concentrating on "the politics of visual subjectivity" in Conrad's Malayan fiction. There are also Saidian echoes – even though the Palestinian intellectual's name is never acknowledged in the book itself – in her postcolonial attempt to read the tales "in counterpoint with history's version." Similarly, although Foucault is not evoked directly in *Conrad's Eastern Vision*, the author stresses "the contestable idea of the Malay" that Conrad manages to conjure out of a matrix that is of "cultural, political, and discursive significance to the colonial powers as well as to the many other stakeholders in the native states and state-controlled territories" (but why does she use that clichéd word so easily bandied in recent developmental jargon?).

Yeow attempts to establish a specifically Malayan context to her reading of Conrad's Eastern stories and novels by arguing that some of them echo the narrative form called *hikayat* that constitutes an important part of the classic literary tradition of the region. Noting that this form is one that oscillates between history and chronicle and describing how it blends the fantastic and the supernatural with historical facts, Yeow sets out to show that a work like

*Lord Jim* “is fashioned along the lines of a *bikayat* in both subject matter and form insofar as it reflects an eclectic blending not only of multiple points of view conveyed by frame-narrators but also of multiple epistemological systems represented by fiction and history.”

Chapter I of *Conrad's Eastern Vision* delineates “the collision of indistinct ideas” in the dialogic mode in Conrad’s works on the Malay Archipelago. Yeow notes Conrad’s ambivalence about Empire. She shows that the novelist was influenced by his own stay in this part of the world but that his views were also shaped by the contemporary western discourse of imperialism. Like other Conradians, Yeow allies the writer with his memorable creation, Stein, albeit with a poststructuralist twist, for both remind her that “art and fiction (and other forms of knowledge, e.g. history and anthropology) intersect and destabilise each other.” This is to say, fact and fiction are jumbled and trade, politics and Anglo-Dutch rivalry collude with the writer’s tendency to fictionalise experience. The point, however, is not an exceptional one, for though Yeow’s stance is buttressed by Bakhtin and poststructuralism, didn’t we always know that history and fiction get together in the novel? Indeed, it is difficult not to conclude after coming to the end of the chapter that her conclusion that novels such as *Lord Jim* resonates with the “interacting voices of history and fiction” as a case of putting old wine in a new bottle.

But even less convincing is Yeow’s bid to give a uniquely Malaysian spin to her analysis by invoking the *bikayat* as a possible antecedent of Conrad’s Eastern fiction in Chapter 2 of *Conrad's Eastern Vision*, where she also looks at Conrad’s treatment of Malays in general and Patusan in *Lord Jim* in particular. She says that “seen in the light of the unique blend of fiction and history common to local historiography, Conrad’s insistence that fiction is history constitutes an uncanny coincidence indeed.” She sees “a subtext of the *bikayat*” in the Patusan sequence of the novel. Jim’s progress and the twists and turns in his fortunes seems fantastic and mythical – the stuff of “exotic romance.” However, and as Yeow herself recognises, such stories of white rajahs were common enough throughout the British Empire, as readers of Kipling’s “The Man Who Would be King” will recall. Also, because she provides no clear evidence of Conrad’s knowledge of Malayan story-telling tradition, how can we conclude so speculatively that he is affiliating himself with the *bikayat* tradition? The affinities she finds between the narratives of the tradition and Conrad’s works are no doubt worth thinking about, but are too general and too indefinite to be embraced with any degree of certainty by anyone seriously looking for sources of Conrad’s narrative art of the period.

Far more telling are the details of Malay history Yeow amasses in the latter part of this chapter to inform us about the novelist’s complex treatment of the social, economic, and political contexts of Patusan. These details convince us that what he has conjured from them is “a remarkably accurate replica of a

historical landscape which has witnessed the ebb and flow of political fortunes” of the white rajahs in this part of the world. In fact, Yeow is at her best in the second half of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of *Conrad's Eastern Vision* where she is able to show how rooted Conrad's portraits of rootless Europeans, Malay Muslims, diasporic Chinese and Arabs, and mixed races are in the demographic as well as the political history of the region. They all mingle in a world of “colonial unease,” in territories that “are fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity,” often occupying “interstitial, intermediary, in between positions.” But while these chapters are illuminating and well worth reading for anyone interested in Conrad's Malayan fiction, they reveal Yeow's indebtedness to works such as Heliena Krenn's *Conrad's Lingard Trilogy: Empire, Race and Women in the Malay Novels* (1990) and Robert Hampson's *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction* (2000).

Chapter IV of Yeow's book is titled “A Vain and Floating Appearance.” This suggests that she has designed it to climax her work. Certainly, the care with which she builds her case for Conrad as “the illusionist *par excellence*” of 19<sup>th</sup> century Malaya who incorporated in his narrative art the new ways of seeing that transformed human visuality at this point of time makes for fascinating reading. But here, too, she mostly extends ideas and insights found in relatively recent critical works on Conrad. In particular, the frequency with which Stephen Donovan's *Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture* (2005) is invoked in this chapter indicates that she is mostly adding to his observations about how new forms of seeing such as the camera and the cinema had had a profound impact on the novelist's envisioning of the people and places of the Malay Archipelago. But it is also true that here as elsewhere she is able to build on the work of others to offer more nuanced interpretations – in this case particularly of the story “The End of the Tether” to convince us that the novelist's “fictional East is deliberately set up as an unstable construct ‘whose true outlines eluded the eye’ and where meaning is constantly making and unmaking itself.”

One can sum up *Conrad's Eastern Vision*, then, as a sophisticated and erudite interpretation of Conrad's eastern world, if not an entirely original one. Nevertheless, it is a work that will be a valuable addition to Conrad scholarship, for Yeow does manage to make us appreciate anew to what extent Conrad had taken up as a credo the declaration he had made in his famous “Author's Note” to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*.” It is Yeow's singular achievement to convince us that this act of *seeing* in his stories of the Malay Archipelagoes is the result of the complex negotiations he had undertaken between his experience of the region and his representations of its history for his readers so that they could envision the complexity of truth.

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