



Moral Dogma and Ethical Relativity in Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*

Subhadeep Ray & Goutam Karmakar

To cite this article: Subhadeep Ray & Goutam Karmakar (2022) Moral Dogma and Ethical Relativity in Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, *The Explicator*, 80:3-4, 127-131, DOI: [10.1080/00144940.2023.2200156](https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2023.2200156)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2023.2200156>



Published online: 12 Apr 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 154





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Moral Dogma and Ethical Relativity in Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*

Subhadeep Ray^a  and Goutam Karmakar^b 

^aKazi Nazrul University; ^bUniversity of the Western Cape

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the intricate treatment of the abstract and dogmatic order of imperial, racial, and religious morality, and the issue of ethical commitment in the concrete and fleeting relationships between individual subjects in Joseph Conrad's debut novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895). The novel is set in the Malay Archipelago, where the fading years of the imperial absolutism of Europe give way to conflicting trade and political interests. A pessimistic philosophical outlook in Conrad's text shows how all the overindulgent narcissistic moral orders accommodate hate and self-interest motivated conspiracy, and simultaneously violate ethical demands of the Other in human contact.

KEYWORDS

Morality; ethics; other; empire; race

Joseph Conrad's fiction is informed by a complex duality between moral codes, institutionally endorsed by the state or community authority to govern its subjects collectively, and ethically informed inter-subjective relations across intersectional bodies of nation, race, creed, and class within an imperial set-up. Conrad's major works, like *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904), and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), as well as his short-fiction encompass a global setting to vividly examine the complex subjectivity of characters caught up in the conflict between their moral obligations as imperial or community subjects and ethical engagements with the Other. This paper attempts to analyze how the author's debut novel, *Almayer's Folly: The Story of an Eastern River* (1895), offers an intricate and distinct treatment of the interface between individual ethics and internally rifted moral dogmas, which remains mostly an unattended domain and deserves critical intervention.

In *Almayer's Folly*, the conflict and imbalance between various moral codes arise from a stage of imperial history when the commercial and political rules of different European states over the tropical islands of the Indian and Pacific oceans were growingly challenged by Arab trade-interests and the rising national and racial self-determination among native communities, with whom both Arab and European traders were forced to negotiate. Norman Sherry notes that Conrad was serving on the *Vidar*, a ship owned by an Arab, when

he met Charles Olmeijer, the real-life model for Almayer (107). The text represents cultural, linguistic, national, racial, religious, and political hybridity, culminating in a form of moral chaos, on the one hand, and a tormented and precarious ethical sense in man-woman relationships, on the Other. This illustrates Conrad's own tumultuous background as a Polish turned British mariner and author. As Amar Acheraiou observes in *Rethinking Postcolonialism* (2008), Conrad's allegiance to the British Empire is ideologically connected to the emphasis on moral restraint in his writing as a sort of self-defense on the part of colonizers. However, the author's own unavoidable identity as someone from a colonized nation serving the colonizing nation pertains to an equally compelling esthetic concern for the fluid and excruciating interactions of individual subjects with other humans and their surroundings in a culturally ambivalent world and raises the issue of ethical relativity. *Almayer's Folly*, particularly, posits the paradoxical conditions of its culturally uprooted central characters, who are divided by moral institutions and engaged in an overriding search for wealth. At the same time, what could be called an 'indomitable call of the Other' asks for ethical responsibility across all divides and profit-seeking, which makes human relationships even more complicated.

The first novel of the Lingard Trilogy, *Almayer's Folly*, moves fast-forward to reach the tragic end of Tom Lingard's career. Lingard's decline signals the crumbling of the white man's morally established right to explore and exploit colonies. Lingard is supposed to have imposed himself over the natives "as 'the Rajah-Laut' – the King of the Sea" (9). Imperial discourse conflates many of the tropes and patterns of adventure/romance narrative with an individual agent's service to the cultural and commercial control of a foreign land, and the former is morally supported as long as it serves the latter. Therefore, "the boldness and enormous profits of his ventures" (10) turn Lingard into a 'hero,' whose moral authority is further confirmed by "the romantic tale of some child—a girl" rescued from "a piratical prau" after a great contest (9). Lingard dogmatically assumes the role of the adoptive father, and for 'civilizing' the Malay girl, 'saved' by him, he arranges a Catholic education for her. Lingard's imperial propensity to shape the fate of his subject provides a key ethical dilemma in the narrative, as the concerned woman never entirely endorses his purpose. The cross around her neck rather than giving her a sense of protection from evil, itself becomes an object of superstitious fear, associated with "terrible notion of some bad Djinns and horrible torments" (33). In Conrad's Borneo the moral authorities of two major religious institutions, Islam and Christianity, are subsumed by the imperial rivalry for wealth. This feeds hate and conspiracy in a power-game that involves local chiefs, with their wish to penetrate "the white man's secret" (64). Conrad's skepticism about the effectiveness of abstract religious morality in absence of ethical understanding among living individuals is thus indicated. The institution of

marriage also falters when, despite the rescued Malay girl's yearning to be engaged to Lingard himself, her rescuer marries her to the perplexed but ambitious Kaspar Almayer.

The motive of self-interest, a binding factor in the imperial scheme of things, blinds Lingard and Almayer to others' feelings and aspirations. Almayer decides to marry the Malay woman in exchange for information about a hidden gold mine that Lingard is supposed to have located. Gold, however, becomes a metaphor for ever-elusive colonial prosperity—the glistening sunshine reflected by the river's water. In the intertwined literary structure, the parallels between Almayer and Lingard and Almayer and Mrs. Almayer illustrate how moral dogma inhibits the ethical capacity of individuals to establish relationships based on mutual trust and respect. In light of irreconcilable cultural divides, the very beginning of the novel reveals that Almayer's utopian desire to flourish through a profitable marriage is destined to fail: “Kaspar! Makan!?...[a] shrill voice startled Almayer from his dream of splendid future into the unpleasant realities of the present hour” (7). Later in the narrative, when Almayer speaks to his daughter in English, which her Balinese fiancé cannot comprehend, language serves as an additional indicator of the fluctuating distance and proximity. Acheraiou points out how in the novel “[t]he recurrence of the adjective ‘white’ reveals the extent to which the politics of race determines Almayer's demeanour and discourse” (136). The fact that Kaspar Almayer is the “only white man on the east coast” (Conrad 145), makes him narcissistically conscious of his moral superiority over everyone else. His lukewarm acceptance of his wife gradually transforms into their shared loathing, and he fervently attempts to overcome the uncomfortable circumstance of having “a half-caste” (25) daughter by providing her with a European upbringing and protecting her from males of other communities. He even seeks “to return to an imagined glorious past (and Europe),” as Xiaoling Yao observes (145). To counter Mr. Almayer's racial chauvinism Mrs. Almayer cunningly and gradually alienates their daughter, Nina, from Western influences and finally instigates her to elope with an Eastern prince.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes the ethical value of becoming “something other than Narcissus waiting to see his own powerful image in the eyes of the other” (54). While in *Almayer's Folly*, both Lingard and Almayer utilize others, particularly dependent women, to gratify their megalomaniac impulses while posing as moral saviors. Both of them fail to acknowledge that human interactions are not unidimensional but rather contingent on a variety of elements beyond power and authority, or, the “narrow mantle of civilised morality” (33). As the conjugal life of Mr. and Mrs. Almayer is destroyed, Nina is victimized most by the contrary pressures of her Malayan and Western identities. Almayer's possessive surveillance over his daughter fails along with his trading schemes, and it is Nina who reveals her father's

unethical conduct: “You wanted me to dream your dreams, to see your own visions – the visions of life amongst the white faces of those who cast me out from their midst in angry contempt” (126). Nina’s epiphany might well be compared with Levinas’ notion of the “ethical relation with the Other,” wherein the Self is not the primary concern but is exceeded by the requirements of the relationship (Hiddleston 17–18).

Almayer accepts the acquaintance of a Balinese Brahmin prince named Dain Maroola, albeit conditionally, because he requires Dain’s assistance in locating the hidden gold and settling in Europe with his daughter: “Dain!’ he exclaimed. ‘[...] I have been waiting for you every day and every night [...] ‘Nothing could have stopped me from coming back here,’ said the other [...] ‘This is a friend’s talk, and is very good,’ said Almayer, heartily” (13). However, Almayer’s predetermined self-interests undermine the possibility of an ethical bond between the two men. Jacques Derrida, in line with Levinas, asserts that friendship “is to love *before* being loved. [...] The friend is the person who loves before being the person who is loved” (8–9). However, Almayer calculates the prospective gain from his friendship with Dain, and remains suspicious about his friend’s intentions: “Surely Dain was not thinking of playing him false” (Conrad 14). The self-satisfying imperial relations are countered by the affair between Dain and Nina, whose mutual attraction rests on each other’s exteriority. Whereas Nina is entrapped by Dain’s “impression of a being half-savage, untamed,” Dain is “dazzled by the unexpected vision” of Nina that makes him forget “all things else” (42–43). Dain’s expression of love maintains a Levinasian ethical move, in which love becomes a force of transcendence: “Dain, at the feet of Nina [...] felt himself carried away helpless by a great wave of supreme emotion” (51). In a hostile environment, Dain resorts to cunning and crime to approach his beloved. Almayer eventually permits Dain and Nina to prevent his daughter’s liaison with a native man from being exposed by Dutch colonial officers.

In his “Author’s Note,” Conrad sharply distinguishes between “common mortals,” whose follies and miseries deserve ethical sympathy, and “graceful phantoms,” who have lofty moral principles but “no heart” (5). This establishes a Conradian motif, specifically skepticism about the feasibility of any single authoritative ‘truth.’ In this context, *Almayer’s Folly* refers to the moral coercion of institutionalized authority. A dead tree, uprooted and drifted by the stream, serves as a poignant emblem in the narrative: “rolling slowly over, raising upwards a long, denuded branch, like a hand lifted in mute to heaven against the river’s brutal and unnecessary violence” (8). Despite its resemblance to a cross, the tree seems to symbolize the earthly pain that necessitates individual ethical attention, and the image conveys Conrad’s esthetic aversion to overindulgent structures of moral streams that ultimately result in “infinity of anguish to innumerable souls,” as he writes to Edward Garnett (qtd. in Stevens 293).

ORCID

Subhadeep Ray  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6663-8045>

Goutam Karmakar  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9119-9486>

Works Cited

- Acheraïou, Amar. *Rethinking postcolonialism: Colonialist discourse in modern literatures and the legacy of classical writers*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Chakravorty Spivak, Gayatri. *Readings*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2014.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Almayer's folly & the rover. Introduction & notes. John Lester*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2011.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The politics of friendship*. Translated by George Collins. London: Verso, 2005.
- Hiddleston, Jane. *Understanding postcolonialism*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2012.
- Sherry, Norman. *Conrad's Eastern world*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966.
- Sevens, Harold Ray. "The Cross of Christ as Afterthought: Killing the Christian Ethic at 'A Outpost of Progress.'" *Joseph Conrad and ethics.*, edited by Amar Acheraïou and Laëtitia Crémona. Lublin and New York: Maria Curie-Sklodowska UP and Columbia UP, 2021. pp. 291–310.
- Yao, Xiaoling. "Forgetting, Memory, and Narrative in Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*." *The Explicator*, vol. 78, no. 3–4, 2020, pp. 143–146. doi: [10.1080/00144940.2020.1844120](https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2020.1844120).