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## ‘A story of a magnificent savage’: interrogating alterity in Joseph Conrad’s *Karain: a memory*

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On 7 February 1897, Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett: “I am thinking of a short story. Something like the [*sic*] Lagoon but with less description. A Malay thing. It will be easy and may bring a few pence” (Karl & Davies 198 : 338). Despite some early criticism of its lush exotic evocations of the Malayan jungle, *Karain: a memory* occupies an important place in Conrad’s short fiction. In the twenty-first century, the story’s appeal lies in its anatomy of alterity, or otherness. This article seeks to explore the religious, cultural and gender dimensions of the story, which give it a postcolonial resonance. The story functions as a catalyst for the deconstruction of stereotypes and affirms the view that despite inherent differences, humankind shares basic goals and dreams.

’n Verhaal van ’n indrukwekkende barbaar’: ondervraging van die andersheid in Joseph Conrad se *Karain: a memory*

Op 7 Februarie 1897 het Conrad aan Edward Garnett geskryf: “Ek dink aan ’n kortverhaal. Iets soos die [*sic*] Lagoon, maar minder bekrywend. ’n Maleisiese ding. Dit sal maklik wees en kan selfs ’n paar pennies verdien” (Karl & Davies 1983: 338). Ten spyte van vroeëre kritiek oor die geil, eksotiese voorstellings van die Maleisiese oerwoud beklee *Karain: a memory* ’n belangrike plek in Conrad se kort fiksie. In die een-en-twintigste eeu lê die storie se aantrekkingskrag in sy anatomie van andersheid of ongewooneheid. Hierdie artikel het ten doel om die godsdienstige, kulturele en geslagsdimensies van die kortverhaal wat ’n post-koloniale weerklank daaraan gee, te ondersoek. Die kortverhaal dien as ’n katalisator vir die afbreek van stereotipes en versterk die siening dat die mensdom, ten spyte van inherente verskille, basiese doelstellings en drome deel.

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BLOEMFONTEIN

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;*  
Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

How people perceive themselves and others, in particular those who look different from them and do not share the same beliefs and values, has been, and continues to be, the major impetus for the ontology of literary and philosophical discourse. Throughout the ages different cultures have sought ways to account for the diversity and the “otherness”, or alterity, of others. The problematic of racial otherness and stereotyping is not peculiar to the modern age, but goes back to our ancestral times. Even the civilised ancient Greeks and Romans had to contend with their “barbarian” other/Other. Over time, people have come to construct themselves along religious, racial, geographic, ethnic or national criteria. Edward Said (1995: 332) gives expression to the arbitrary nature of the construction of alterity in his seminal publication *Orientalism*:

The construction of identity [...] 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.

Apart from being inducted by F R Leavis into the canon of the “Great Tradition” of English literature, Joseph Conrad is noteworthy for bringing people from foreign climes, the East in particular, to his readership in England. An unsigned reviewer, thought to be Arnold Bennett, wrote the following under the caption “Our awards for 1898 – The ‘Crowned’ Books”: “It is Mr Conrad’s achievement to have brought the East to our very doors, not only its people [...] but its glamour, its beauty and wonder. He is one of the notable literary colonists. He has annexed the Malay Peninsula for us” (Carabine 1992: 277). In an unsigned review of *Tales of unrest* in the *Daily Telegraph*, 9 April 1898, the story is described in the following terms:

Incomparably the finest [story] is the opening one, [...] a story of a magnificent savage, a Malay chieftain, who is haunted by the ghost of his friend whom he had shot down deliberately when he was about to take the life of his sister and the Dutchman with whom she had fled from her own people. [...] Mr. Conrad is known as a writer of Malay sketches, and he brings vividly before us the wild picturesque life of the curious, untameable race that inhabits the Archipelago (Sherry 1973: 101).

Whilst complimentary in the main, the foregoing critique bears the hallmarks of colonialist discourse, which views the other/Other as a “curious, untameable race” led by their chieftain who is described as “a magnificent savage”, an oxymoron which I have highlighted in the title of this article. Imperialist discourse is replete with binary oppositions such as human/bestial, good/evil, and civilised/primitive. Much of *Karain: a memory* purchases into these binaries and seemingly sponsors hypostasised notions of otherness in order to justify the imperial project, only to deconstruct the logic of such polarities on closer interrogation.

While formalist criticism of *Karain: a memory* by established Conradians ranged from the dismissive to the indifferent, as exemplified by Karl who pronounced that such “descriptive virtuosity [was] wasted on a story that is self-limiting (Karl 1960: 119), critical engagement with the story over the past two decades has been trenchantly poststructuralist and postmodern. In one such study, Brown & Sant, deploying the constructs of Lacan, Mulvey and Bhabha, demonstrate how the figure of Karain is eroticised, emasculated and appropriated by his three European interlocutors. One of their conclusions is:

In the ontologies of the self, European man arrogates to himself the properties of reason and bestows on the ‘Other’ emotion, often neuroticized as hysteria, schizophrenia, madness, incoherence, superstition: irrationality. And as the fetish is (according to Freud) most commonly sexual, so colonial representation has commonly conflated the registers of gender and racial difference, sometimes (as here) producing [...] the source of scopoc and Imaginary fixation and of compulsive scopophilia and incomprehension (Brown & Sant 1999: 245).

Notwithstanding the robust scholarship displayed by Brown & Sant, their critique demonstrates how poststructuralist theory often goes overboard in not seeing, figuratively, the wood for the trees. The notion of Karain being eroticised and emasculated is based on an incident when the three white men hand Karain a dry sarong to replace the wet one he is wearing, having swum to their boat in the night: “Karain slipped the dry sarong over his head, dropped the wet one at his feet, and stepped out of it. I pointed to the wooden chair [...].”<sup>1</sup> How this brief incident – which I construe as a demonstration of common human decency – eroticises, emasculates and appropriates the protagonist is a moot point, to say the least. This by no means implies that a close reading or “pract crit” exercise should replace a poststructuralist enquiry. Conrad (via the narrator) has provided a clue to the deconstructive potential of the story by introducing a self-reflexive, postmodernist touch towards the end of the tale when the narrator intrudes to address the reader directly. When Karain, exorcised of the ghost of Pata Matara, returns to his kingdom, the narrator records: “We cheered again; and the Malays in the boats stared – very much puzzled and impressed. I wondered what they thought; what he [Karain] thought; [...] what the reader thinks?” (*Tu*: 52). This invitation to the reader to think opens up multiple paths to the story as evinced in the surge of studies undertaken over the past two decades, primarily from poststructuralist, psychological and postcolonial perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

Postcolonial theory, according to one source, is the “region of ‘taboo’ – the domain of overlap between [...] imperial binary positions, the area in which ambivalence, hybridity and complexity continually disrupt the certainties of imperial logic”.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to recent readings of the text which focus on the cynicism of the Marlow-like narrator whose tale is [allegedly] manipulated to

1 Conrad 1946, *Tales of unrest* [hereafter abbreviated as *Tu*]: 22

2 Prominent among them are Wollaeger 1990, GoGwilt 1995, Billy 1997, Krajka 1998, Krajka (ed) 1999, Erdinast-Vulcan 1999, Hampson 2000, Dryden 2000, Adams 2001, Acheraïou 2007.

3 <<http://everything2.com/title/Binarism>>

serve an imperialist agenda, this article will, first, endorse the common bonds of friendship that exist between Karain and his European friends. There can be no doubt about this, as the narrator declares at the end of the first movement:

He was an adventurer of the sea, an outcast, a ruler – and my very good friend. I wish him a quick death in a stand-up fight, a death in sunshine; for he had known remorse and power, and no man can demand more from life (*Tu*: 8).

Secondly, this article will focus on the interstitial spaces in the colonial encounter from which emerge subjectivities whose ambivalence poses a constant challenge to our essentialist constructions of the other/Other. Located within a postcolonial matrix, this article will explore not only the enigma of the protagonist of the tale, as all the other studies have naturally done, but also its religious, cultural and gender configurations which constitute an important weft in the narrative's postcolonial fabric. In the interest of consistency, the term "other" (with a lower case "o") will be used to denote the colonised others who are marginalised by imperial discourse. The term "other/Other" denotes both alterity (otherness) and the object of desire (as in the Freudian and Lacanian notion of the mother/father figure).

## 1. An anatomy of alterity

Despite its "adjectival ... insistence", a quality Leavis (1972: 206) discerned in *Heart of darkness* and its surfeit of lush visual evocation, *Karain: a memory* is an anatomy of alterity and a deconstruction of the bases on which subjectivities are constructed. A coda to its layered complexity as a dialectic on the discourse of otherness is provided by a narratorial intrusion towards the end of the story when the three Englishmen see Karain going off in a canoe after they have given him a Jubilee sixpence as an amulet to protect him from the ghost of Pata Matara, the friend he betrayed and killed. Immensely pleased with themselves at having duped the superstitious native, they give him three cheers in the best British tradition, to the puzzlement of the Malays in the boat. Upon reflection on the entire incident, the narrator ponders: "I wondered

what they thought; what he thought; [...] what the reader thinks?” (*Tu*: 52). This self-reflexive intrusion – a postmodernist touch – invites the reader to take stock of the foregoing narrative and to interrogate his/her assumptions about alterity in terms of how the rest of the Malays perceived this episode of the amulet, how Karain felt about it, and how the readers back in England construed it. If one could isolate two predominant features of postmodernist writing, they would be, first, a self-consciousness which demands “of the reader both detachment and involvement” (Hutcheon 1988: x) and, secondly, an ontological dimension which poses questions such as “What is a world? [...] What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (McHale 1989: 10). The pregnant pause introduced by the ellipsis in the phrase “[...] what the reader thinks” interpellates the contemporary reader to position him-/herself *vis-à-vis* not only the episode of the Jubilee sixpence which celebrates Queen Victoria’s reign, but also the entire story which, in the final analysis, is a dissection of human relationships across racial and cultural divides within the context of colonialism. Robert Hampson (2000: 127) suggests that by implicating the reader in the narrative, Conrad problematises the boundary between reader and text in the same way as the narrative has problematised boundaries between cultures. By drawing parallels between different cultures in their attitude towards the wearing of amulets and charms, Conrad does not promote the conception of a hierarchy of values between cultures but emphasises the commonality between them. Not only natives and “savages” but also Europeans attach importance to charms, as will be noted presently.

The configuring of the identity of Karain, the protagonist, is enabled by means of one of the most ornate tropes in Conrad, namely that of a stage and performance, with its implied themes of illusion and reality. It is a trope that is sustained from the beginning until the end of the tale. Early in the story an elaborately constructed presence of the ruler of three villages, Karain, is presented on stage:

Meantime he filled the stage with barbarous dignity [...] He gave them wisdom, advice, reward, punishment, life or death, with the same serenity of attitude and voice. He understood irrigation and the art of war – the qualities of weapons and the craft of boat-building. He could conceal his heart; had more endurance; he could swim longer, and steer a canoe better than any of his people; he could shoot straighter, and negotiate more tortuously than any man of his race I knew. He was an adventurer of the sea, an outcast, a ruler – and my very good friend (*Tu*: 8).

Linda Dryden (2000: 119), echoing Conrad, rightly argues that Conrad taps into his readers' preconceptions about the East in order to create a "magazine'ish" quality. The word "magazine'ish" was used by Conrad himself in a letter dated 14 April 1898 to his friend R B Cunninghame Graham who gave the author the final approbation for the embattled story: "I am glad you like Karain. I was afraid you would despise it. There's something magazine'ish about it. Eh?" (Karl & Davies 1986: 56-7). Without wishing to detract from Dryden's fine critical insights elsewhere, her assertion at this point that the writer uses the romantic genre merely to attract an audience with no intention to subvert it is questionable in the light of the theatrical presentation of Karain as well as the tenor of her own study which tackles the issues of femininity, empire and racial subjugation. The antithetical terms of the description of Karain, his brutal qualities such as his dispensing of the death penalty and his warlike predisposition, juxtaposed with his creative abilities, argue a position that deconstructs the colonial stereotype of the "magnificent savage", as the unsigned reviewer in the *Daily Telegraph* put it. On whose authority can Karain be described as "barbarous"? His expertise in dealing with matters of life and death in relation to his subjects may seem "barbarous" from the perspective of the Western narrator, but as a leader he has to protect his people from other ethnic groups who are a source of constant threat, as well as dispense justice in consonance with his society's mores. The irony in the use of the word "barbarous" is enriched when one considers that the person who employs it is a gun-runner and a purveyor of arms to the natives.

## 2. Deconstructing stereotypes

The term “barbarous” is an echo of an earlier image. In the second paragraph of Part 1 we are introduced to the otherness of the Orient in a profusion of contradictory yet colourful and sumptuous images such as “faces dark, truculent, and smiling; the frank audacious faces of men barefooted” (*Tu*: 3); “their ornamented and barbarous crowd” (*Tu*: 4); the “variegated colours of checkered sarongs, red turbans, white jackets, embroideries; with the gleam of scabbards, gold rings, charms [...] and jewelled handles of their weapons” (*Tu*: 4). John McClure (1985: 154) postulates that artists tend to write both within and against the conventional discourses of their times. In making his case for both Kipling and Conrad, he avers that their portraits of other peoples are inconclusive, drawn now in the conventional terminology of racist discourses, “now in terms that challenge these discourses and the image of the other they prescribe” (McClure 1985: 154). He also asserts that “a strong consensus in the west [*sic*] held all peoples of other races to be morally, intellectually and socially inferior to white Europeans, and saw their ostensible inferiority as a justification for domination” (McClure 1985: 154). The picture of the Malays presented by the narrator is a complex one. They are warlike yet friendly; barefooted yet dignified; and if superstitious because they wear charms, they are sufficiently civilised to produce gold and jewellery, which are symbols of wealth, power and civilisation in the West. However, the Malays are not the only ones who believe in charms. When Hollis, the youngest of the three gun-runners, rummages in his box for the Jubilee sixpence, the narrator comments sardonically on seeing some of the objects in it – such as a white glove, flowers, buttons and letters – all mementoes of a girl back home: “Amulets of white men! Charms and talismans! Charms that keep them straight, that drive men crooked, that have the power to make a young man sigh, an old man smile” (*Tu*: 48). Around the figure of Hollis, with all these “gifts of heaven – things of earth”, the narrator conjures up for a brief moment the lost world of mystery and romance:



All the ghosts driven out of the unbelieving West by men who pretend to be wise and alone and at peace – all the homeless ghosts of an unbelieving world – appeared suddenly round the figure of Hollis bending over the box; all the exiled and charming shades of loved women; all the beautiful and tender ghosts of ideals, remembered, forgotten, cherished, execrated; [...] Hollis was facing us alone with something small that glittered between his fingers. It looked like a coin (*Tu*: 48).

Such withering irony, characteristic of Conrad's general oeuvre, is an outcome of his constant juxtaposition of colonial racial discourse with a contrapuntal reading of it. The irony, however, is often eclipsed by his narrators' overt racist comments. That Conrad's narrators sponsor racial and racist stereotypes occasionally is a given in his writing. At the beginning of Part 3 of *Karain: a memory*, for example, the narrator speaks of the protagonist's preparation for war with a steadfastness of which he thought him "racially incapable" (*Tu*: 18). Further down the page, he speaks of Karain's primitive ideas, his "childish shrewdness" and his "concentrated lust of violence which is dangerous in a native". Racist stereotyping such as this was the stock-in-trade of nineteenth-century colonial discourse.

Said (1995: 207) proposes that the Oriental was viewed "in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment", having an identity best described as lamentably alien. While Said views racial stereotyping in binary terms such as "us" and "them", the West and the Orient, Homi Bhabha's nuanced re-reading of Said introduces the constructs of fetishism and ambivalence into the discourse. Drawing upon the psychoanalytical work of Freud and Lacan, Bhabha proposes that the fetish or stereotype leads to an identity which is predicated on mastery and pleasure, as well as on anxiety and defence, for it is a contradictory belief in its recognition of differences and a disavowal of it (Bhabha 1994: 75). Karain's difference represents a fetish or a stereotype that is alien to the Western mind but at the same time it represents, in Lacanian terms, the lack, or the Other, which is both feared and desired. Ted Billy's (1997: 129) comment is pertinent in this regard: "Moreover, Conrad turns the

myth of the noble savage inside out by endowing Karain with anxieties endemic to the Western sensibility [...]”.

If Conrad’s narrator appears to subscribe to the imperialist discourses which perpetuate the us/them dichotomy, then the ambivalence that Bhabha speaks of becomes evident when the narrator begins to subvert such stereotypes. In the following passage, for example, the haunted Karain appeals to his European interlocutors to take him to their land: “To your land of unbelief, where the dead do not speak, where every man is wise, and alone – and at peace!” (*Tu*: 44). David Adams (2001: 725) stated that the story “not only exploits but also undermines the opposition between Western enlightenment and Eastern superstition by treating the English narrator’s rationalism ironically”.

The subject of the coin – the Jubilee sixpence – given as a charm to Karain to ward off the ghost of Pata Matara has received due attention, none more so than by David Adams who devotes several pages to it, even providing a photograph of it (Adams 2001: 731). Of the several valuable insights offered by Adams, three aspects are of salience to this article. First, Adams reminds one that the story was conceived and written in the early months of 1897, when preparations for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria were in full swing. Thus, the emblematic significance of the coin produced by Hollis would not have been lost on Conrad’s readers. Secondly, the sixpence was gilt, resembling the new half-sovereign. Hence it was “an invitation to fraud” (Adams 2001: 734), reflecting on the dubious nature of imperialism’s stranglehold on other nations. This ironically casts doubt on the magical powers that Karain attaches to the sixpence. Thirdly, the coin depicted a queen who was obsessed with her personal mourning for the loss of Prince Albert in 1861. This, to Adams, signifies that the imperial pageantry of the Jubilee celebrations remained haunted by the dead who would not rest. This has its obvious parallel in the narrative of Karain who is haunted by the ghost of Pata Matara.

Karain’s deep deference for Queen Victoria, whose image so fascinated him that he never failed to enquire about her every time the

Europeans visited him, can be attributed to his own mother who had been a ruler:

He spoke of her with pride. She had been a woman resolute in affairs of state and of her own heart. After the death of her first husband, undismayed by the turbulent opposition of the chiefs, she married a rich trader, a Korinchi man of no family. Karain was her son by that second marriage, but his unfortunate descent had apparently nothing to do with his exile (*Tu*: 14).

The strength of character displayed by Karain's mother is a reminder of other strong women in Conrad's depiction of the Orient. In sharp contrast to the Queen in some respects, she is self-willed and decisive, and assumes agency and authority for her own actions. It must be borne in mind that the story was written at the time when women in England were denied the vote. In reference to *Heart of darkness* and Conrad's early Malay tales, Rebecca Stott (1993: 43) writes: "The contours of these women, pictured or framed against a 'riot of foliage,' in twilight or in checkered green sunlight, dissolve into the erotic confusion around them". While feminist scholars such as Stott, Ruth Nadelhaft (1991) and Susan Jones (1999) have contributed significantly to reclaiming women such as Nina and Mrs Almayer (*Almayer's folly*) and Aïssa (*An outcast of the islands*) from the "riot of foliage", as it were, and putting them centre stage, people such as Stein's unnamed wife in *Lord Jim*, as well as Jewel and Doramin's wife in the same text, are too much in the thicket to emerge as substantial characters. But their dazzling, albeit brief presence in these texts is a counterweight to the chauvinistic and condescending remarks Conrad's narrators make in passing about women – European women in particular – in texts such as *Lord Jim*, *Heart of darkness* and "The return". In other asides, Oriental women are presented in a more generous light. Stein's late wife used to pack a pistol and look after the household when Stein was away; Doramin's anonymous wife in *Lord Jim* advises him secretly on matters of state; Jewel warns Jim about his habit of keeping an unloaded pistol. She takes command of the settlement when Jim is away. In such vignettes of characterisation, Conrad represents his Oriental women as stronger than the men in their lives.

Conrad's Malay women are invested with agency, authority, sexual power and even guile – qualities that render the men in their lives quite malleable to their will and desire. Considering that these women are generally of Islamic persuasion, they are neat counterpoints to the commonly held perception of all Muslim women as being subservient to their male counterparts. Laura Mulvey, in her pioneering work of the 1970s on scopophilia and the male gaze in cinematography, wrote:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly (Mulvey 1992: 750).

On the same subject, Bhabha (1994: 81) adds that in the objectification of the scopic drive there is always the threatened return of the look. In the encounter between the anonymous Dutchman and the equally anonymous Pata Matara's sister, the voyeuristic male gaze is disrupted. Given that the Dutchman who "laughed aloud like a fool" (*Tu*: 29) and "looked into women's faces" (*Tu*: 29) was culturally insensitive, it is the woman who initiates the move that disgraces her family and that leads to tragic consequences. "Promised to another man" (*Tu*: 30) of her own racial background, she decamps to live with the Dutchman, as Karain narrates the story to the three Europeans fifteen years later:

Then Pata Matara's sister fled from the campong and went to live in the Dutchman's house. She was a great and wilful lady: I have seen her once carried high on slaves' shoulders amongst the people, with uncovered face, and I heard all men say that her beauty was extreme, silencing the reason and ravishing the heart of the beholders (*Tu*: 30).

For a Muslim woman in a conservative society, the action of going about in public unveiled is tantamount to sexual provocation. Such was the sexual power she exercised over the man that he "left his house, his plantations, and his goods" (*Tu*: 30). In the words of Karain, "She had ravished his heart!" (*Tu*: 30). During the years of pursuit of the couple by Karain and the brother, both of whom are committed to the honour killing of the woman, Karain himself

succumbs to the memory of her charms and becomes besotted with her. Hence, at the fatal moment when they discover the couple and Pata Matara instructs Karain to shoot the Dutchman while he prepares to kill his sister with a knife, Karain betrays his friend by shooting him instead of the Dutchman. The woman's reaction in this scene receives the approbation of Karain. When Pata Matara leaps out of the thicket wielding the knife, Karain reports: "I heard her cry; I saw her spring with open arms in front of the white man" (*Tu*: 38). Anne Tagge's (1997: 109) comment on this episode is that "Conrad admits her courage but turns her into an evil force". This interpretation is in keeping with Tagge's tendentious reading of Malay women in Conrad's fiction "as destroyers of men's self respect" (Tagge 1997: 109). Karain's own judgment in this instance is more to the point: "She was a woman of my country and of noble blood" (*Tu*: 38). When the Dutchman enquires if she knows Karain, she has the presence of mind, if not the guile, to deny ever seeing him. This is not an act of betrayal, as some commentators have suggested, or as Karain construes it, but a lie told to protect her countryman. In this scene one witnesses a reversal of the traditional active/male, passive/female paradigm in gendered behaviour.

### 3. A contrapuntal reading

Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan (1999: 61-2), in a comprehensive chapter on the story, presents the thesis that *Karian: a memory* is an assassination of its predecessor, "The lagoon". Her point is that while *Karain: a memory* might seem like a clone of its predecessor because of the similarities in style and setting, it is not a replication because in moving from "The lagoon" to *Heart of darkness*, *Karain: a memory* can be read as a turning point, a deconstruction of the logic of sameness and identity on which its ostensible prototype is premised (Erdinast-Vulcan 1999: 61-2). Towards the end of the story when Karain returns to the "glorious splendour of his stage" (*Tu*: 52), one hand on the hilt of his kris in a martial *pose* [my emphasis, HS], he sweeps a "serene look over his conquered

foothold on the earth” (*Tu*: 52). As he makes his exit from the world of the narrator, Jackson and Hollis, and returns to his people, this dramatic gesture reinforces the trope of performance and suggests Karain’s return to the next stage of his life where he would have to adopt a different identity and defend his people from other intruders, other conquerors. When the narrator meets Jackson seven years later in front of the shop of an arms dealer, the latest firearms on display remind Jackson of Karain and the current unrest in the East. From Jackson’s comment, “He will make it hot for the caballeros” (*Tu*: 54), one surmises that Karain is now engaged in battles with the Spaniards. This recalls the beginning of the story where the narrator speaks of the various native uprisings in the Eastern Archipelago (*Tu*: 3) which are being reported in the newspapers. Through the interstices of the opening paragraphs, the memory of Karain asserts itself, conjuring up a world of “sunshine and the glitter of the sea” (*Tu*: 3). This luminous image of the East is in sharp contrast to the drab surroundings in which the narrator and Jackson meet at the end of the tale. In this instance, in England, it is “A watery gleam of sunshine” (*Tu*: 54) that flashes on the “broken confusion of roofs, the chimney-stacks, the gold letters sprawling over the fronts of houses” (*Tu*: 54). The ersatz gold lettering reminds the reader of the authentic gold rings and jewellery worn by the natives in Karain’s world and this constitutes an ironic riposte to Jackson’s question put to the narrator as to whether Karain’s world was true; whether the story of Pata Matara’s ghost haunting Karain was true.

The narrator of *Karain: a memory* has received due attention from critics. Some have credited him with more insight and understanding than others who have found him quite obtuse and even duplicitous at times. Amar Acheraiou (2007: 162-3) contends that the narrator’s voice has a “contrived rhetoric” which serves to rewrite “the East as exclusively a world of exoticism and backwardness to suit European readers’ prejudices”. Commenting on the apparent inconsistencies in the reading of his character, Adams (2001: 746-7) states:

Given the ignorant comments the narrator sometimes makes and Conrad's distance from them, I have chosen to view the narrator as consistently uncomprehending and to see his wiser and more unsettling observations as authorial intrusions. In some passages [...] the limitations of the narrator and the insights of Conrad are evident on different levels, and thus coexist to great effect.

The dualism in the narrator, like the Conradian trope of the "figure behind the veil", is a problem that one encounters periodically in the writer's oeuvre. Instead of taking the position that Adams does, which is nearly like having one's cake and eating it as well, I prefer to regard the narrator as a kind of Marlow, in particular the Marlow of *Heart of darkness* – a Janus-faced figure who is possessed of an ironic sensibility but who is also capable of generating stereotypes, as most ordinary people do. Herein lies the deconstructive potential of the text. It is to the credit of the narrator and his two mates that Karain comes to them for assistance. Notwithstanding Karain's naivety in thinking that the gun-runners are on an assignment for Her Majesty's government, these are men whom he trusts because they are prepared to listen to him on a level of social equality, without a hint of a master-servant, or coloniser-colonised relationship:

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 (*Tu*: 26).

One critic, who is highly sceptical of the sincerity of the narrator, dismisses the above sentiments in the following terms: "This is as fine a piece of colonialist cant as one could hope for" (Humphries 1992: 157). He also calls it "humbug" (Humphries 1992: 157). In relation to the same extract, Christopher GoGwilt (1995: 45), who argues persuasively that the entire story serves an imperialist discourse, nevertheless acknowledges the humanist, anti-imperialist stance of the narrator although he contends that it "is undercut by the tale's context within the historical unrest

surrounding colonial control of present-day Indonesia and the Philippines”.

Whether commerce between the different races acts as an antidote to imperialist ideology remains a contentious issue. However, as Acheraïou (2007: 165) points out, cultures “are determined by ideology and hinge on essentialist assumptions which reinforce their insularity and make them impervious to otherness”. Notwithstanding the validity of Acheraïou’s assertion in a general sense, the story of Karain illustrates the counter argument that a symbiosis between cultures, if not individuals, is possible if, in terms of Levinas’s ethical imperative, the subjectivity of the other precedes my own freedom and I am responsible for the other:

For me, the freedom of the subject is not the highest or primary value. The heteronomy of our response to the human other, or to God as the absolutely other, precedes the autonomy of our subjective freedom. As soon as I acknowledge that it is ‘I’ who am responsible, I accept that my freedom is anteceded by an obligation to the other (Cohen 1986: 27).

Apart from supplying him with arms, the Europeans have endeared themselves to Karain because they have empathy with his people, unlike the crude Dutchman who, as Karain puts it, “despised our joys, our thoughts, and our sorrows” (*Tu*: 29). But then other critics, such as Acheraïou, for example, would regard the allusion to the “crude Dutchman” as another instance of contrived or embedded dialogue to favour British imperialism over Dutch imperialism, as Marlow does in *Heart of darkness*.

If the three Europeans at times betray a sense of mild superiority and condescension towards Karain, then they also display a sense of cultural and religious sensitivity that is reminiscent of the Lingard of *An outcast of the islands* and *The rescue*. Before Hollis gives Karain the Jubilee sixpence, he asks the narrator: “Do you think he is fanatical – I mean very strict in his faith?” (*Tu*: 48). Hollis is the youngest of the three, and on more than one occasion he displays a sense of wisdom beyond his years. He explains to the narrator that what he intends giving Karain as an amulet for protection is “an engraved image”. This is a reflection of not only Hollis’s knowledge of Islamic



customs but also his religious sensitivity. The keeping or worshipping of graven images is one of the taboos of Islam. Fortunately for the European men, Karain does not appear to be fanatical about his religion. Much to their relief, he accepts the coin and is eternally grateful for it. Herein resides Karain's ambivalence, and perhaps the supreme irony in the story. Nothing is what it appears to be – a theme that is reinforced by the trope of presenting Karain's Eastern world in terms of a stage performance. Karain, a ruler of his people, is Islamic by faith, yet by accepting a graven image he transgresses one of the tenets of his religion when he should be the defender of his faith. The irony is enriched when one realises that the image is that of the Queen who is also a custodian and symbol of her faith, Christianity. In a discussion on *Lord Jim*, Jameson (1981: 246) observed in a footnote that the thematic selection of Islam in that novel is no historical accident as it represents the historical and cultural other. By the same token *Karain: a memory* provides the interstitial space, or the "liminal space" as Bhabha (1994: 4) refers to it, for a trans-cultural encounter of these two belief systems.

#### 4. Conclusion

In some ways this article has been a dialectical rejoinder to the famous opening couplet of Kipling's poem, "The ballad of East and West", which has been used as the epigraph to this article. The second couplet of the poem, which is not as often quoted as the previous couplet, reads as follows: "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,/When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!" The story *Karain* "a memory", which provides the dialectical space for the meeting of men who come from the ends of the earth, endorses the view that despite racial, cultural and religious differences, there are bonds between men and women that transcend their original identities.

In transgressing his Islamic orthodoxy, Karain assumes the guise of a hybrid figure, combining the incommensurables of belief and unbelief. He wants to be taken to England, the land of unbelief, but

he remains, at the behest of his friends, in his own country, having compromised his own belief in the process. Karain is represented as an actor on stage, a person who takes on different roles. He is the kind of hybrid, mimic man that Bhabha (1994: 86) has postulated: “Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power”. Mimicry, according to Bhabha, also implies resemblance and menace (Bhabha 1994: 86). Combining elements of Christianity, Islam and paganism (at one stage he is compared to the Greek hero Odysseus), Karain’s character *poses* [my emphasis, HS] a conundrum to both the reader and his European friends. This resonates with what Wollaeger (1990: 51) has said:

[The] Malayan setting itself, with the white men moored in a kind of liminal space offshore, can be seen as a metaphor for a radically different understanding of the world, an understanding Marlow would struggle with, though in a somewhat different form, in *Heart of darkness*.

The story of Karain, the Malay chieftain, strikes a keynote in the performativity of its protagonist’s identity. The Eastern Seas from where Conrad tells us he carried away into his writing life “the greatest number of suggestions” (author’s note to *The shadow-line*, vii) offers the writer a fascinating locality because of its “mixture of sophistication and primitiveness [...] and especially [...] the intimacy of a small society of white men in an alien setting” (Sherry 1966: 6). On one reading, the story is consonant with Edward Said’s exposition of Orientalism, a theory about the West’s construction of the Orient, predicated on the polarities of us and them, the West and the East, the civilised and the savage. On another reading, Karain’s character may be viewed against Bhabha’s construct of the fetish or stereotype which, in Lacanian terms, represents the Other which is both feared and desired. In the person of Karain, Conrad deconstructs conceptions of the “noble savage” and colonial stereotypes about the superstitious, barbaric Other. The episode of the Jubilee sixpence might perpetuate the stereotype of the naive, gullible native, but the amulets and charms in Hollis’s box ironically undercut such

preconceptions about the rationality or the moral superiority of the Europeans. As Adams (2001: 725) maintains:

One of the story's central points, demonstrated repeatedly, is that Europeans are no less superstitious and no less criminal. Like Karain, they prove to be haunted by the voices of the dead; their power, like Karain's, is not free of remorse; and their hopes for relief take a form no less mystical.

As Karain returns to his own world, which is conveyed in the elaborate conceit of a stage performance, he occupies a threshold or stage of liminality, at which point he slips into his next role or identity as the leader of his people.

The stage as a metaphor for the enactment of life's illusions has served Shakespeare well in several plays. Indeed, in *Karain: a memory* Conrad has presented a veritable stage which is traversed by actors who make their entrances and exits, with Karain as the central character around whom others construct their identities. When the narrator poses the self-reflexive question about what the reader "thinks", he provides an important cue to the way one sees others and oneself. In his influential work *Culture and imperialism*, Said (1994 [1993]: 407-8) writes:

Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were, mainly, exclusively, white, or black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities.

Identities, as this article hypothesises, are never fixed in binary oppositions of us/them, black/white, and East/West, but are always in a state of flux. If Conrad gave the story of Karain a glossy magazine look to cater for the exotic taste of his Victorian readers, as Dryden has posited, in the twenty-first century the story's appeal lies in its interrogation of alterity. As such, the story reinforces the themes of alterity and cultural difference and functions as a touchstone for the study of alterity in Conrad's oeuvre in general. All in all, *Karain: a memory* constitutes a kaleidoscopic array of characters who defy the stereotype, which Barthes has termed "a necrosis of language" (Barthes 1977: 199).

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Not even Conrad, who is ever alert to what one makes of others, is above essentialising, as is evident in the off-hand remark he made to Garnett about Karain’s story being “A Malay thing”.

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