

Conradian East and Gender Dynamics: An Ecofeminist Reading of Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*

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Abstract

The early writings of Conrad, especially his tales like *Almayer's Folly*, significantly revolve around an exoticized eastern setting – primarily, the Malay Archipelago – where the interaction between native and foreign characters plays a commanding role. Framing the female characters with alluring, inferior, and oriental attributes, Conrad, wittingly or unwittingly, amalgamates and exoticizes nature and women of the East, depicting them as intertwined and subjugated “Other”. Whereas this paper acknowledges that the act of avoiding Eurocentric binaries on the part of a white writer almost succumbs to a failure, it also speculates Conrad's conscious effort to disinherit the dominant orientalist zeitgeist. Deciphering the colonial biases that are imposed upon both Eastern women and nature, alongside the ambiguous position of Conrad as a writer, this paper intends to attempt an ecofeminist reading of Conrad's debut novel, *Almayer's Folly*. Through the lens of various strands of ecofeminist thought, this study will be able to add a set of new ideas to the ongoing discussions on gender, ecology, and colonial discourse in colonial literature.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Orientalism, Gender, Joseph Conrad, Colonialism, Eurocentric binaries.

The universal association between women and nature has peculiarly, patronizingly, and problematically been shaped by the dominant male ideologies, which remain persistently entrenched and unchallenged unless confronted by necessity or a conscious effort to reform the world. Achieving fairness requires the cooperation of nature and an indispensably equal participation of both men and women. To address such needs, ecofeminism is increasingly recognized as a crucial framework in contemporary discourses and a means to advocate both gender and environmental justice. Simon de Beauvoir observes, in her seminal book, *The Second Sex*, that women and nature both are the constant victims of otherization executed by monolithic patriarchal ideologies, as she says, “Earth, Mother, Goddess – she was no fellow creature in man's eyes.”¹ It implies men's condescending position as the self in society which reduces women and nature to the other and sends them to the inferior locales – almost on the periphery. The fact that makes ecological feminism, that is, ecofeminism, distinct in the eyes of Karen J. Warren is “its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues.”² But the interdependence of women and nature in sustaining the ecological balance is often either overlooked or discarded as a custom by many. Beauvoir argues, “the tie between woman and land was still closer than that of ownership, for the matrilineal regime was characterized by a veritable assimilation of woman to the earth; in both the permanence of life – which is essentially generation – was accomplished through the reproduction of its individual embodiments, its avatars.”³ Building on this, the

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symbolic interconnection, collaborative notions, and shared generative roles between nature and women reveal a deeply rooted reciprocity – one that lies at the heart of ecofeminist thought. Again, Ariel Salleh expresses, “by introducing the nature-women-labor nexus as a fundamental contradiction, ecofeminism affirms the primacy of an exploitative, gender-based division of labor, and simultaneously shifts the analysis of all oppressions toward an ecological problematic.”⁴

However, though Conrad’s female characters in the fiction that I intend here to work with are decades away from this comparatively unprecedented phenomenon, an ecofeminist reading can illuminate the intersecting oppressions of these women and nature of orient, offering new insights into colonial narratives. By speculating the colonized women of Conrad’s time, an ecology-related feminist – not the early mainstream liberal feminists who were only initially absorbed in attaining equality within a particular white race – can already discern the doubly oppressed inhumane lifestyle of those, who already existed in the periphery of a male-dominated indigenous society, and now have become the poorest “subaltern” at the severe expansion of imperialism and colonial effects, and who cannot even speak for themselves, proving themselves almost “doubly colonized”.⁵ Meyda Yegenoglu, in her book, *Colonial Fantasies*, says, “The Western Subject’s desire for its Oriental other is always mediated by a desire to have access to the space of its women, to the body of its women and to the truth of its women.”⁶ From this perspective, the exoticized representation of women in the Eastern setting of Conrad’s story causes a stir, demanding revaluation with an alternative narrative through the lens of ecofeminism to make a paradigm shift.

Besides, Conrad, in his stories, not only utilizes the Eastern setting as something alluring or exotic but also often showcases women to stir a sheer sense of sensuality to embolden the existing dominant narratives and the presumed cultural superiority of Europe. In a sense, this represents a selling of the culture of the “Other” by rendering it forcefully ethnicized and inferior – a culture framed as mysterious, in need of wide exploration, and often presented deplorably solely for European consumption. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is useful to understand the intricate psychology behind such narratives, as he says, “in time “Oriental sex” was as standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture, with the result that readers and writers could have it if they wished without necessarily going to the Orient”.⁷ This notion made writing about Orientals more appealing and commercially viable – something Conrad may have consciously capitalized on. Ian Watt also states, “the exotic had become a major mode of nineteenth-century literature”⁸ and Conrad assumably was one of its followers. As a consequence, he, perhaps, displays the oriental women stereotypically, making them stagnant – weirdly stuck in the same old dogmas, from which no seed of hope germinates and no erudite depiction takes birth. Yet, it is certainly considerable that bewildered by the rapid expansion of colonization in the late nineteenth century and its racial dynamics, Conrad’s writing was by no means unaffected by both its positive and negative aspects, causing his position to waver between orientalist and non-orientalist perspectives. Edward Said again illuminates by saying, “in Europe itself at the end of the nineteenth century, scarcely a corner of life was untouched by the facts of empire”⁹, and

“imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others”.¹⁰ Zooming in on the oscillation of Conrad’s imperially driven mind and his earlier merchant-marine career of 19 years – where he had direct exposure to the people of Malay Archipelago – the nexus of women, ecology, and social justice is discussed with the framework of ecofeminism.

On the other hand, ecofeminism envisions justice by simultaneously contemplating contemporary movements and critically testing the historical violations done onto both women and nature. In this regard, Conrad’s Eastern stories rekindle historical narratives surrounding women and nature – utilizing which the present condition can be assessed to make justice true through an ecofeminist mirror. Additionally, the imperial predicament in some of his selected fiction succinctly comes out with the insight that the past form of imperialism comes in the disguise of neoliberalism¹¹ in the present, as both of these phenomena advocate the expansion of business, trade, and capitalism in every possible area executing their colonialist motives in the milieu without confronting any impediments of geopolitical borders and registrations, regardless of the denunciations of nationalists and environmental activists. Socialist ecofeminism¹² – a branch of ecofeminism among many other prominent ones – outrightly points the finger at the tumultuous condition of domination that includes prodigious patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism for which the ecology gets irrevocably damaged and women too become subjugated through the subsequent mindless class oppression.

The novel that I wish to explore in this paper is broadly rooted in the context of colonial trade, which plays as a crux to shape characters, their rivalry or benevolence with each other, and plot structure. While imperialism was rising manifesting itself deceptively as a spontaneous righteous form of treating nature, fiction like *Almayer’s Folly*, set in the backdrop of the Malay Archipelago, evokes and reinforces the stereotypical representation of how the dominant culture views the marginalized ones. In doing so, it perennially pervades a Eurocentric worldview that continues to shape global perspectives. This process might include travesty and even the politics of selective language for the selective narrative to bolster the Eurocentric view where the other – both natives and nature – has to encounter racism, sexism, slavery, patriarchal dominance, oppression, and corruption, getting thoroughly silenced and buried in the grindstone of ecological damage. Nevertheless, women are instinctively seen as the primary caregivers of nature. Both nature and women reflect one another symbolically, as they interconnectedly share a history of Western domination, are regarded as inherently fertile, and possess both reproductive and sacrificial capacities. Ecofeminists also confirm that women are the sole attendants and defenders against environmental degradation even after becoming subservient to the male-exercised domain.

Almayer’s Folly is a treasure land that teems with an orientalist view – an all-engulfing trope that resembles exoticism in every definable way and in turn, invokes a room for an ecofeminist analysis. Watt comments, “As the reviews of *Almayer’s Folly* make clear, Conrad was in part following current market formulae. *Almayer’s Folly* could, after all, be regarded as a romance in the most popular sense, since it contained a love story with a happy ending; and it also fitted in with contemporary interest in exotic adventure”.¹³

The story significantly revolves around Kasper Almayer, an European trading enthusiast who struggles to settle in the precarious environment of Eastern Sambir – which is filled with hungry Dutch and other European seamen and traders – to fulfill the long-cherished desire of conquering the “mountain of Gold” called “Gunog Mas” (AF 105) but in vain.¹⁴ Persuaded by Captain Tom Lingard – an experienced navigator seeking a husband for his adopted Malayan daughter – Kasper Almayer agrees to marry her, making her Mrs. Almayer with the hope to receive the roadmap of the treasured mountain promised by Lingard, though he disappears and is never seen again. Yet Almayer keeps fostering his folly of reaching the mountain of gold and the arrival of Dain – a Balinese prince and his newly acquired ally, who also promises to help him – greatly revives his enthusiasm. However, the marriage between them symbolizes the unfit and fatalistic union of West and East under colonial rule, as Almayer’s European condescension could never allow him to accept the native woman as his wife, rather an incessant negation of their relationship was ubiquitous throughout the whole text that culminates in the death of Almayer, leaving Mrs. Almayer free of European ties. Observing the characteristics of Mrs. Almayer one might think that Conrad, as a narrator, fabricates his native characters in a way that a European would expect them to be and not what a non-European would expect them to be. Rana Kabbani, a writer-historian, related to this matter, posits –

In the European narration of the Orient, there was a deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the West, exiled it into an irretrievable state of ‘otherness’. ... But it was in the nineteenth century that they found their most deliberate expression, since that period saw a new confrontation between West and East – an imperial confrontation. If it could be suggested that Eastern peoples were slothful, preoccupied with sex, violent, and incapable of self-government, then the imperialist would feel himself justified in stepping in and ruling.¹⁵

But the aftermath of this mindless imposition of false allegations onto the skin of the natives is so harsh that practices like racism, sexism, linguisticism, and the renunciation of non-European people remain a regular occurrence – with women being the worst victims of it all. Conrad also places Mrs. Almayer into such a position by giving her dialogues similar to Caliban,¹⁶ and her activities similar to his mother, Sycorax.¹⁷ This “savage tigress” (AF 37) is often presented as half-naked – wearing only “green jacket” and “scant sarongs” almost having a “witch-like appearance” (AF 45), a “shrill voice” (AF 50) and a conjectured licentious relationship with Babalatchi, the mischievous statesman of Sambir, and is seen in “stupefied idleness” (AF 38). All these attributes are similar to the representation that Orientalism as a discourse establishes, where women with a sense of agency are explicitly labeled as witches and exiled. Sycorax was sent to an unnamed island as a punishment for her alleged association with a devil, where she gave birth to Caliban and died afterward. Likewise, Almayer’s building a “riverside hut” (AF 38) for Mrs. Almayer to keep her in seclusion reflects the same kind of exile as Sycorax, as Babalatchi also confirms saying, “she has a Devil of her own to whisper counsel in her ear” (AF 159). Rana Kabbani, again remarks:

The Projection of evil onto marginal and powerless groups within a society has always been a convenient method of producing scapegoats. ... women were associated with the devil, and seen as enemies of the Church and civilization. This went to justify the witch-hunts that tried women for sexual rapaciousness, cannibalism, consorting with evil spirits, and being generally intractable and capricious.¹⁸

Whereas decorating with the ornaments of civilization seemed the only responsibility of Tom Lingard towards his adopted daughter, Mrs. Almayer, the latter more and more felt the inner atavism¹⁹ growing wildly while she was confined in the “high wall” and “quiet gardens” of the “Samarang convent” (AF 31). Subsequently, Mrs. Almayer, becomes the absolute agent of her own will kicking out all the troubling forces from her life, and rather succeeds at making her own fortune at the end of the novel. Yet, she had greater potential, having inherited the innate strength of her ancestors – the Sulu Pirates – to forge a different lifestyle in the wilderness by immersing deep into her racial and cultural heritage. Her realization that “her old life departed too” (AF 31) while being captured by the Whites, illustrates the utmost powerlessness of Mrs. Almayer – first as a woman and then as a native. Simone De Beauvoir rightly points out, “condemned to play the part of the Other, woman was also condemned to hold only uncertain power: slave or idol, it was never she who chose her lot ... woman’s place in society is always that which men assign to her; at no time has she ever imposed her own law”.²⁰ Mrs. Almayer perceives the fatalistic power of a White and the potentiality of the instrument called “civilization” and thus acquiesces to give up on everything initially. The illusion of civilization is so deeply ingrained and pre-eminent in nature that it overshadows the environmental scenic beauty of Mother Earth and diminishes the benedictions she offers us.

Nevertheless, for Conrad, the usual life of a Malay woman is confined to the familiar generalization of the “usual succession of heavy work and fierce love, of intrigues, gold ornaments, of domestic drudgery, and of that great but occult influence which is one of the few rights of half-savage womankind” (AF 32) – a depiction he directly applies to Mrs. Almayer in the text. These are but the old dogmas of mainstream Orientalists where only abasing the Other in the same way occurs repeatedly in paraphrased narrations. However, many of his critics have alleged that Conrad was greatly indebted to earlier writers who portrayed Malay life and culture, despite having ample opportunities to explore the “brute reality”²¹ of the Orient and its women by himself during his time in the Malay Archipelago for occupational purposes. Critics like Hugh Clifford have outrightly criticized him for his complete inadequacy of knowing the “Malays and their habits and custom”²², highlighting Conrad’s incapability of comprehending the cultural diversity of the Orient. In this light, a woman of that time, that too from the orient, was seen as little more than an exotic object. She was assumed merely as a domestic figure, lacking intellectual depth or a cultivated mind. Therefore, she can ruthlessly and parallelly be exploited along with nature, as Johanna Oksala remarks, “nature is externalized as a costless resource that is implicitly assumed to be infinite and can therefore be expropriated without compensation.”²³ The former dichotomization of body and mind of a woman is a field of criticism in ecofeminism theory since it challenges the dualistic frameworks and binaries made by the White supremacy which only increases disparity and discrepancy both in nature and culture.

But mirroring the similar sense of dichotomy, Conrad abruptly puts some “worldly-wise” words to Mrs. Almayer who boldly asserts her identity as a wife from her indifferent white husband, shouting, “I am your wife! Your own Christian wife” (AF 54); then again, is seen retreating to her old primitive seclusion immediately afterward. It is worth noting

that Conrad has to endow her with a Western education to make her assert any claim to the status of a White man's wife. This suggests that a native Malay woman, who automatically is engineered to reduce herself to slavery by patriarchal pressure, would otherwise be unperceivable as a figure possessing a voice. Spivak famously assures on this note, "the subaltern cannot speak".²⁴ What Conrad ignores – as many masculine Westerners do – is that Mrs. Almayer has a spontaneous connection with the environment since she, even in the face of domination, fulfils the duty of reproduction in her loveless marriage with Kasper and continues to protect and nurture her space – a symbolic reference to their only daughter, Nina – shielding her from the masculinity of the White father. Cultural ecofeminist phenomenon also, according to Carolyn Merchant, "embraces intuition, an ethic of caring, and web-like human-nature relationship."²⁵ Therefore, as nature offers fertility even amid colonial destruction and deforestation, and with its adorned greenery saves us from countless disasters and calamities, besides, because the degradation of both women and nature occurs "within a [patriarchal] society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination",²⁶ it can be observed that Mrs. Almayer's suffering is not hers alone, rather it resembles the plight of nature itself.²⁷

Yet, ecofeminism is often criticised for promoting "essentialism" due to its association with reproduction, nurturing, and caring – traits traditionally and patriarchally constructed as the essence of womanhood and align closely with nature. Therefore, many argue that ecofeminism cements female subjugation by domesticizing them more sternly instead of giving them a liberatory identity, whereas ecofeminism actually embraces women's intuitive nature and maintains that they can still transcend such imposed limitations and recognize their full potential. For instance, cultural ecofeminism – closely tantamount to the notions of radical feminism – celebrates the intuitive, nurturing, and delicate qualities of women, viewing women and nature as an interconnected source of power to dismantle the restrictive ideologies of essentialism. Again, Merchant claims that "women around the world have often consciously used perceived threats to their own bodies, communities, and nature itself as motivations for political action,"²⁸ implying that an ethics based on "essentialism" only, would never generate a political movement within women to save "mother earth". But ecofeminism, defying the tenets of "essentialism", functions as a catalyst for movements against the oppression of both nature and women, positioning itself as a more advanced theory – one that stands in clear contradiction to "essentialist" thought. Furthermore, ecofeminism seeks to ignite the long-suppressed selfhood of women, encouraging them to ask for their deserved rights as "women", rather than chanting thoughtlessly for equal rights as men. This dimension makes ecofeminism more resonant with Conrad's characters. We have seen ecofeminists being susceptible to dominance, hierarchy, and power dynamics as these are the closest notorious cousins of male counterparts that help in subjugating female bodies and their minds as well; characters like Mrs. Almayer, Nina, and even Taminah – the impoverished Siamese slave – confronted these intersecting forms of violations. Eventually, each breaks free from her metaphorical cocoon and retaliates against male oppression, seeking to retrieve her rights.

Nevertheless, capitalism exposes Almayer's underlying patriarchal mindset, as he exhausts the mind of Mrs. Almayer by marrying her without any intention of granting her a meaningful position as his wife, rather uses her as a means to achieve profit through the capitalist figure, Tom Lingard. Lingard, contrastively, not only reveals himself, projecting the despicable image of a capitalist but also unveils his patriarchal hypocrisy through racialized logic. He persuades Kasper to marry his adopted Malay daughter, disregarding her racial identity by saying, "nobody will see the colour of your wife's skin" as "the dollars are too thick for that" (AF 17). Women being compared with money in the era of money-making capitalism and imperialism is only a continuation of the ancient notion of auctioning women. But this process offers insights into abolishing the covert mechanisms of patriarchy, under which women continue to be dehumanized as inferior beings. However, Kasper is also observed to think parallelly like Lingard, as he attempts to conceal the biracial identity of Nina, believing "nobody would think of her mixed blood in the presence of her great beauty and of his immense wealth" (AF 10), once they are in Europe. Gwyn Kirk succinctly points out that "in the service of capital accumulation, white-dominated, capitalist patriarchy... creates 'otherness'", and concomitantly, this affects women, nature, "people of color and poor people worldwide".²⁹ Again, supercilious Kasper, in turn, dehumanizes his wife, casting her as a scapegoat and reducing her to what he sees as a meek "Malay woman, a slave" – someone disposable, who might "mercifully die", or can be shut up "anywhere, out of his gorgeous future" (AF 18) once he attains what he desires. He unapologetically makes Mrs. Almayer feel unwanted and snatches their daughter, Nina, away from her and sends her to Mrs. Vinck for a European convent, and imagines a future together without his wife; the patriarchal dominance is blatant here since, Mrs. Almayer is the one who bore Nina for nine months in her womb and yet she is deprived of nurturing her. Natural minerals and resources are also robbed of in the same manner. As a consequence, both nature and women give birth to upheavals by showing their wrath when the ceaseless ill-treatment of patriarchy needs to be pacified. Just as upheavals of natural calamities happen in response to anthropocentric activities, Mrs. Almayer takes revenge by freeing herself and her daughter, Nina, from the European knot of Almayer as an act of retaliation at the end of the text.

Nina, the female protagonist, on the other hand, having a hybrid identity, is much inclined to her mother's indigenous roots out of a sense of proximity to nature. But Almayer leverages his daughter's vitality to retrieve his lost glory in the society, since her arrival after years causes a stir in the land and people start to hover around Almayer for a chance to examine the mixed-race Nina, making her an exotic voiceless piece of art. From this angle, he can be discerned as an epitome of a patriarchal self, exhausting inexorably and unmercifully natural resources until the capitalistic mind is satiated – which, perhaps, never happens. Besides, being the resident of a liminal world, Nina symbolizes and unsettles the binary of East and West, whereas the former is associated with primitiveness and the latter with reason and culture. Her rejection of the multiple facades of the West and adoption of the raw and authentic East makes her position forthright, fulfilling the ecofeminist demand of rejecting hegemonic dualism and accepting the intersection of women and nature. Furthermore, her elopement with the

Balinese prince Dain, defying and abandoning her father, illustrates Nina's resistance against patriarchy and her ability to take agency of her own to fight against dominance and power. No doubt, Mrs. Almayer instigates the whole process of elopement, using it as an act of final revenge against white supremacy, and thus, she brings forth freedom both for herself and her daughter.

Another blazing character is Bulangi's slave, Taminah, who suffers violence even from the wives of Bulangi – women who enforce patriarchal structures and embody capitalistic exploitation. Women involved in patriarchal dominance consolidate the idea that "[not] all women are empathic, nurturant and co-operative".³⁰ However, Taminah is the most pathetic delineation of Conrad, since she is the "subaltern" who lacks a voice for about two-thirds of the novel but rather exists like "an apparition" and of "no importance whatever" (AF 137). Even her distress "could find no words to pray for relief, she knew no heaven to send her prayer to" (AF 147). Again, Taminah appears as a seller of rice cake, a food that comes from nature and after refinement is sold to the market; it explicitly upholds her profound relationship with nature as selling them, as a slave, is her daily job. This corresponds to materialist ecofeminism's claim that "specific groups of women have a distinct connection to the environment through their interactions with it."³¹ Again, Johanna Oksala remarks, "there is a clear strategic incentive for feminism and environmentalism to join forces: protecting the environment also directly improves the lives of poor women."³² However, while men are seen busy trading in gunpowder, or "brass guns" (AF 43) or mining gold out of "Gunog Mas – the mountain of gold" (AF 105), serving as phallic representations of male-dominated capitalist enterprise, women – including Mrs. Almayer – are illustrated husking rice, cooking it using fuels from nature, making pastry out of rice to make the people taste something healthy for sustainability. In this regard, Deane Curtain came up with a useful observation in 1999, later rephrased by Trish Glazebrook, who explains that women's work is "viewed as backward in the development picture because it is labor-intensive rather than capital-intensive, and because its strategy is to cooperate with nature rather than to dominate and control – in short, because it favors what is traditional, small-scale, and low-tech over what is modern, scientific, rational, and high-tech."³³ While women treat nature as its cohabitor, and cooperate with each other jointly, their male counterparts often perceive nature as an extension of womanhood – the "other" – and thus, as something open to exploit and control.

However, Conrad explains Taminah's inner turmoil in such a charismatic manner that it resonates with the universal slogan of all slaves out there. Her retreat to nature hearing the "murmur of the water" and "the whisper of the wind" (AF 140) frames her as a keen attendee of nature. Although she hardly converses with anyone in the novel, her encounter with Almayer becomes a hindrance to the eloping couple – Nina and Dain Maroola – with Nina of mixed heritage and Dain of a single racial background, as they attempt to escape Almayer's wrath and rejection. Taminah feels already disquieted by her unexpressed and unrequited love for Dain – a man of higher social standing – and is later depicted as a capricious antagonist, driven by jealousy to spoil the happiness of the two lovers. It prompts the reader to wonder why Conrad, despite frequently emphasizing the malignity of Arab characters like Abdulla and various Dutch traders, paradoxically casts a Siamese slave as the malicious character – "the she-dog with white

teeth" (AF225) – to further the plot. Is it a natural inclination within interracial hierarchies to vindicate one's position by making evil out of the slave, thereby perpetuating their assigned role in a life of slavery? Conrad's action of casting Taminah as an antagonist, therefore, seems abrupt and ambiguous. Nevertheless, her oppressed nature resonates deeply with feminists, who connect her with the most trodden aspects of nature – both silenced and stripped of their agency.

The intensive dependency of nature and women on each other is even more intricately interwoven and according to Maria Mies, the "pure" male spirit tries to "rob women and nature of the subjectiveness, that is, of their own dignity, their spirituality, and turn them into lifeless, controllable matter".³⁴ Taminah is seen unleashing her subdued soul by taking a "leap of faith"³⁵ to seek a spiritual and personal journey fulfilling the prominent tenets of reformation in ecofeminism. Karen J. Warren pens down, "it is in 'letting go' of the door [past/known door] that one experiences living in the moment, being 'in the present'."³⁶ Likewise, Taminah, emerging from her suppressive body, finally decides to step forward in hope, seeking solace from her monotonous life of servitude. Her sorrowful coexistence with nature in its "dense thicket" and "complete solitude" (AF 149) delineates their shared agony along with spiritual extension against the capitalist patriarchy. Ecofeminists give meaning to this intersectionality of nature and women claiming it as something logical, believing in employing socialism for an egalitarian society, terminating capitalism in the apparatus of the politics and economics of a country. Dualisms like body and mind, East and West, or women and nature are strongly questioned by ecofeminism as they cannot formulate a holistic view; instead, they result in bias, partial inaccuracies, and an 'assumption of infallibility'³⁷ in perception. Val Plumwood agrees saying, "dualism is a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalized in culture and characterized by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled."³⁸ Cultural ecofeminists address this paradox and seeks negotiation between nature and culture, emphasizing that both should be mutually dependent through coexisting, so that justice, to both women and environment, can be done.

It is now evident that Conrad's women in *Almayer's Folly* are seen to have the closest connection with nature, which stems from spiritual ecofeminism. Among them, Taminah's spiritual journey has already been elaborately interpreted through the lens of spiritual ecofeminism. Her leap of faith as an attempt to emancipate her slave-like body is held in a positive light since ecofeminist resistance is pursued through her agency. Another influential female character, Mrs. Almayer, who depends on natural resources to cook food and fulfill her domestic drudgeries, is closely connected with nature as a result of being otherized by Almayer and the author's portrayal. Both the nature of Sambir, the fictional Eastern land where the characters reside, and Mrs. Almayer are illustrated by European eyes as prehistoric, barbarous, hysteric, and steeped in squalor and murkiness. Cultural ecofeminism is useful to define Mrs. Almayer's connection with nature since it embraces women's natural instinct to give birth, protect their child, and safeguard the hearth to which she remains loyal. Mrs. Almayer, likewise, gives birth to Nina and wishes to raise her according to her own values in order to protect Nina's

identity against the dire patriarchy. Mrs. Almayer has no name as she has no roots left after Lingard eradicated part of the Sulu Pirates – including her origin – and adopted her as his daughter. But her resistance in the text is portrayed in an overtly dramatic manner, serving to “embody values, ideas and emotions”.³⁹ She starts to disobey her white husband and protests in her own way to foreground her and her daughter’s welfare. Nina, whose cultural duality prominently underpins the East-West contradiction, is part of ecofeminism’s criticism. Since ecofeminism challenges dualisms by rejecting hierarchical structures and advocating for a balance between racial identities and the natural world, Nina’s identity is pursued not as a half-breed, but as that of a fully independent woman. Her resistance is also presented in the most dramatic way when she finally breaks her ties with her white father in order to dismiss existential crisis and assert her own identity.

Overall, the text of Conrad – *Almayer’s Folly* – is replete with notions that align with ecofeminist principles, yet, they are not overtly imposed in the text and certainly not in a deliberate manner. In fact, they remain hidden – for Conrad in his moments of uncritical perspective, largely remains partial to the Eurocentric modernist view where exploitation of nature and women is considered with indifference – and thereby, must be uncovered to construct an ecofeminist interpretation. Even in his most seemingly unbiased moments, he often perhaps inadvertently unravels his biases. Yet his partiality is unique and tied with a sense of honest struggle, for Conrad’s individuality, according to Edward Said, “resides in a continuous exposure of his sense of himself to a sense of what is not himself”.⁴⁰ In this constant endeavour to separate his morally grounded individuality from the polluted present of imperialism and colonialism, Conrad often falls prey to dualism, which is an indispensable human condition. Besides, his contemporaries who were prolific at that time including Rudyard Kipling, mostly acquiesced and advocated imperialism along with an orientalist view and Conrad’s thoughts are often shaped by their influential remarks; thus, Conrad is often labelled as “the Kipling of the Malay Archipelago”.⁴¹ Then again, Conrad’s vision of real-life often stands in contradiction to his own beliefs, which he accepts with a serene confession that “what is a novel if not a conviction of our fellow-men’s existence strong enough to take upon itself a form of imagined life clearer than reality and whose accumulated verisimilitude of selected episodes puts to shame the pride of documentary history.”⁴² It obliquely indicates his crystal-clear knowledge about the reality and its vulnerability that is outshined easily by an imaginary fabrication or representation of tales. Therefore, it can be partially accepted that Conrad knows what he writes and to what extent he is willing to let his inner thoughts be revealed to the reader. Linda Dryden even thinks, examining other tales of him, that Conrad was fully conscious and his “work displays an awareness of the Empire’s glorious past, but shows its late nineteenth-century present to be fraught with unease and doubt about the existence of absolute truths.”⁴³ She even quotes Cedrick Watts, who remarks Conrad as “both conservative and subversive”,⁴⁴ thereby illustrating him as an ambiguous figure.

However, this very act of ambivalence leads him to write a novel in which Conrad exposes the intersections of nature and women, portraying patriarchal and masculine ideologies and how they get detrimentally exoticized and become perpetual objects of

oppression and violation, and therefore, need an immediate recognition to dismantle male-driven exploitation of natural and human resources. A fair negotiation of the oppressed (i.e., women and nature) and the oppressor (i.e., patriarchal capitalistic society) is made possible by employing the takeaways of ecofeminism, as it provides “conceptual analysis, theoretical perspectives, and argumentative support for the nature and significance of various “women-nature connections.”⁴⁵ Even though Conrad’s portrayal of women in his debut novel is entangled and overlapped with a sense of narrative naivety, Western ideology, and exotic attributes, one should not outrightly label him as an orientalist solely by analysing his early Eastern writings. As we have already acknowledged his complex surrounding and its dubious effect on his endeavour to depict life lucidly, Conrad’s creative consciousness evolves with time, making his portrayal of women characters in his later texts seem less biased and more nuanced. Therefore, this paper locates Conrad oscillating between being a problematic orientalist and then again, a whistle-blower of colonial activities. However, *Almayer’s Folly* is never a mere attempt to forge a literary authority by turning ethnicity, exoticism, or the ‘other’ into commodities for imperial consumption. Instead, it offers room to assess the shared colonial history of women and the nature of the past and unravel the implicit gendered hierarchies embedded in the text. Invoking an ecofeminist critique here, therefore, bridges the gap between colonial past and contemporary environmental concerns, while also encapsulating a broader spectrum of analysis that helps us locate the looming presence of colonialism in postcolonial discourse, even after its official demise.

Notes and References

- ¹ Simone De. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (ed.), H.M. Parshley (trans.) (Great Britain: Lowe and Brydone (Printers) LTD, 1953), p. 96.
- ² Karen J. Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism: women, culture, nature* (Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 4.
- ³ Simone, p. 93.
- ⁴ Ariel Salleh, “Nature, women, Labor, capital: Living the deepest contradiction”, *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 6 (2009), pp. 21-39, 26.
- ⁵ John McLeod. *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 175.
- ⁶ Meyda Yegenoglu. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 72-73.
- ⁷ Edward W. *Orientalism* (A Division of Random House, 1979), p. 190.
- ⁸ Ian Watt. *Essays on Conrad* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 49.
- ⁹ Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage Book, 1994), p. 8.
- ¹⁰ Edward, 7.
- ¹¹ Neoliberalism is widely preferred as a pejorative term since it promotes inequality and nothing better comes out for the working-class people whereas the rich get richer. It is completely a capitalistic strategy and also, immensely anthropocentric, as it leaves the earth more exhausted by institutionalizing it for more surplus. As a result, we get a little bit of nature in this post-modern society which was at least affluent in modern society.
- ¹² Among many categories of ecofeminism, socialist ecofeminism is concerned with capitalist patriarchy, as the nature of reproduction of women exposes the oppressive treatment done by men on women and similarly, the process of production reveals how men mindlessly use and misuse raw and natural resources for their financial gain. Social ecofeminists mark this disproportion and promote an egalitarian society. Carolyn Merchant. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 205-208.

- 13 Ian Watt, p. 49.
- 14 Joseph Conrad. *Almayer's Folly: A Story of an Eastern River* (London, Eveleigh Nash, 1904). References of this text are to this edition and cited hereafter only by page numbers within parenthesis. Shortened title, that is, AF is added with page number if intervened by other references.
- 15 Rana Kabbani. *Europe's Myths of Orient* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1986), pp. 5-6.
- 16 On page 32 of *Almayer's Folly*, it is shown how Mrs. Almayer only could easily grasp the "superstitious elements of the religion" while learning the English language in the European convent by the "good sisters" to fulfil the wish of Lingard of becoming a Eurasian. This concomitantly reminds us of Caliban's famous dialogue, "You taught me language and my profit on't Is I know how to curse" (I.ii.) towards Prospero and Miranda, as they taught him their language. Mrs. Almayer, like Caliban, finds that she better "propitiate" (AF 32) to escape danger from her master, Tom Lingard.
- 17 Sycorax from *The Tempest* is identified as a witch who has Caliban, his freckled monster son, by intermingling with Setebos or the devil himself and has been discarded her nativity from Algiers to a peculiar land for her powerful evil nature
- 18 Rana Kabbani, p. 5.
- 19 Atavism, is a sense of going backward to meet the primitive urge, the ancient, the primordial state of humankind. This is a hidden trope in most of Conrad's texts set in colonial contexts.
- 20 Simone De. Beauvoir, p. 102.
- 21 Edward, *Orientalism*, p. 5.
- 22 Robert Hampson. *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction* (Palgrave, 2000), p. 72.
- 23 Johanna Oksala, "Feminism, Capitalism, and Ecology", *Hypatia* 10, No. 10 (2018), pp. 1-19, 8.
- 24 Spivak Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.) (Columbia Up, 1994), p. 104.
- 25 Carolyn Marchant. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable Worlds*, ed. 2nd (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 202.
- 26 Rosemary R. Ruether. *New Woman, new earth: sexist ideologies and human liberation* (Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 204-221.
- 27 Warren outwardly says, "nature is a feminist issue". See details in, *Ecofeminism*, p. 4.
- 28 Carolyn Merchant, p. 196.
- 29 Gwyn Kirk, "Standing on Solid Ground: A Materialist Ecological Feminism", *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 349.
- 30 Val Plumwood. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, (Routledge, 1993), p. 9.
- 31 Johanna Oksala, "Feminism, Capitalism, and Ecology", *Hypatia* 10, No. 10 (2018), pp. 1-19, 4.
- 32 Johanna, 4.
- 33 Trish Glazebrook, "Karen Warren's Ecofeminism", *Ethics and Environment* 2 (2002), pp. 12-26, 16.
- 34 Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism* (Zed Books, 1993), p. 14.
- 35 The Kierkegaardian leap of faith refers to the trust or belief that might prove delusional, wrong, lack of reasoning, and irrational. Here, this usage has been deployed to extend the spectrum of spirituality with the cooperation of nature.
- 36 Karen J. Warren. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), p. 196.
- 37 "Assumption of infallibility" is a famous phrase by which Mill tries to mean that people who remain obstinate in their opinion and assume other opinions are bogus or false and therefore, offer a deaf ear fall under the category of this. John Stuart Mill. "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion" in *On Liberty* (Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1864), p. 34.
- 38 Val Plumwood, pp. 47- 48
- 39 Ruth L. Nadelhaft. *Joseph Conrad* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 13.

- ⁴⁰ Edward W. *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 9.
- ⁴¹ Linda Dryden. "Introduction" in *Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Romance* (Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), p. 51.
- ⁴² Joseph Conrad. *A Personal Record* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1912), p. 35.
- ⁴³ Linda Dryden. "Introduction" in *Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Romance*, p. 8.
- ⁴⁴ Linda Dryden, p. 8.
- ⁴⁵ Karen J. Warren. "A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on Ecofeminist Spiritualities" in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, Carol J. Adam (ed.) (The Continuum Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 119-132, 122.