

# Problematizing Conrad's vision and beliefs

## Fakrul Alam attempts envisioning the complexity of truth

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

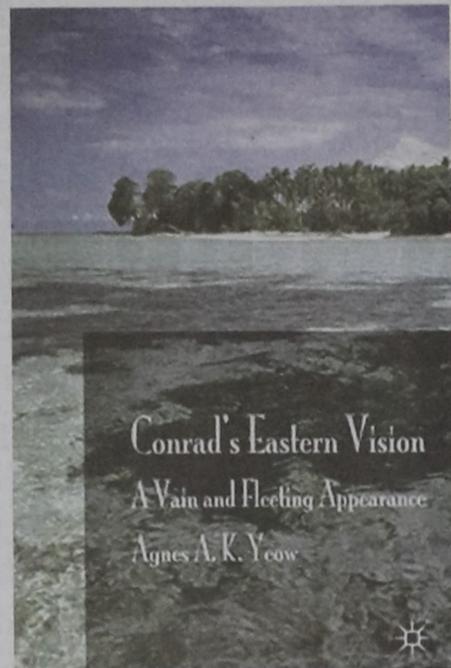
Yeow roots her analysis in ideas emanating mainly from Bakhtin and poststructuralist thought. Bakhtin enables her to see a Conrad who "tacitly acknowledges that fiction and history are dialogic and contesting voices". Another Bakhtinian idea that influences her is his concept of "the surplus of seeing"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

Yeow attempts to establish a specifically Malayan context to her reading of Conrad's Eastern stories and novels by arguing that some of them echo the narrative form called *hikayat* that constitutes an important part of the classic literary tradition of the region. Noting that this form is one that oscillates between history and chronicle and describing how it blends the fantastic and the supernatural with historical facts, Yeow sets out to show that a work like *Lord Jim* "is fashioned along the lines of a *hikayat* in both subject matter and form insofar as it reflects an eclectic blending not only of multiple points of view conveyed by frame-narrators but also of multiple epistemological systems represented by fiction and history".

Chapter I of *Conrad's Eastern Vision* delineates "the collision of indistinct ideas" in the dialogic mode in Conrad's works on the Malay Archipelago. Yeow notes Conrad's ambivalence about Empire. She shows that the novelist was influenced by his own stay in this part of the world but that his views were also shaped by the contemporary western discourse of imperialism. Like other Conradians, Yeow allies the writer with his memorable creation Stein, albeit with a poststructuralist twist, for both remind her that "art and fiction (and other forms of knowledge, e.g. history and anthropology) intersect and destabilize each other". This is to say, fact and fiction are jumbled and trade, politics and Anglo-Dutch rivalry collude with the writer's tendency to fictionalize experience. The point, however, is not an exceptional one, for though Yeow's stance is buttressed by Bakhtin and poststructuralism,

didn't we always know that history and fiction get together in the novel? Indeed, it is difficult not to conclude after coming to the end of the chapter that her conclusion that novels such as *Lord Jim* resonates with the "interacting voices of history and fiction" as a case of putting old wine in a new bottle.

But even less convincing is Yeow's bid to give a uniquely Malaysian spin to her analysis by invoking the *hikayat* as a



Conrad's Eastern Vision  
A Vain and Floating Appearance  
Agnes S. K. Yeow  
Palgrave Macmillan

possible antecedent of Conrad's Eastern fiction in Chapter 2 of *Conrad's Eastern Vision*, where she also looks at Conrad's treatment of Malays in general and Patusan in *Lord Jim* in particular. She says that "seen in the light of the unique blend of fiction and history common to local historiography, Conrad's insistence that fiction is history constitutes an uncanny coincidence indeed" She sees "a subtext of the *hikayat*" in the Patusan sequence of the novel. Jim's progress and the twists and turns in his fortunes seems fantastic and mythical the stuff of "exotic romance". However, and as Yeow herself recognizes, such stories of white rajahs were common enough throughout the British Empire, as readers of Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" will recall. Also, because she provides no clear evidence of Conrad's knowledge of Malayan story-telling tradition, how can we conclude so speculatively that he is affiliating himself with the *hikayat* tradition? The affinities she finds between the narratives of the tradition and Conrad's works are no doubt

worth thinking about, but too general and too indefinite to be embraced with any degree of certainty by anyone seriously looking for sources of Conrad's narrative art of the period. Far more telling are the details of Malay history Yeow amasses in the latter part of this chapter to inform us about the novelist's complex treatment of the social, economic and political contexts of Patusan. These details convince us that what he has conjured from them is "a remarkably accurate replica of a historical landscape which has witnessed the ebb and flow of political fortunes" of the white rajahs in this part of the world. In fact, Yeow is at her best in the second half of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of *Conrad's Eastern Vision* where she is able to show how rooted Conrad's portraits of rootless Europeans, Malay Muslims, diasporic Chinese and Arabs, and mixed races are in the demographic as well as the political history of the region. They all mingle in a world of "colonial unease", in territories that "are fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity," often occupying "interstitial, intermediary, in-between positions" But while these chapters are illuminating and well worth reading for anyone interested in Conrad's Malay fiction they reveal Yeow's indebtedness to works such as Heliena Krenn's *Conrad's Lingard Trilogy: Empire, Race and Women in the Malay Trilogy* (1990) and Robert Hampson's *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction* (2000).

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

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

Dr. Fakrul Alam teaches English literature at Dhaka University.

# The humour in a politician

## Syed Badrul Ahsan goes through a collection of Churchillianisms, laughing all the way

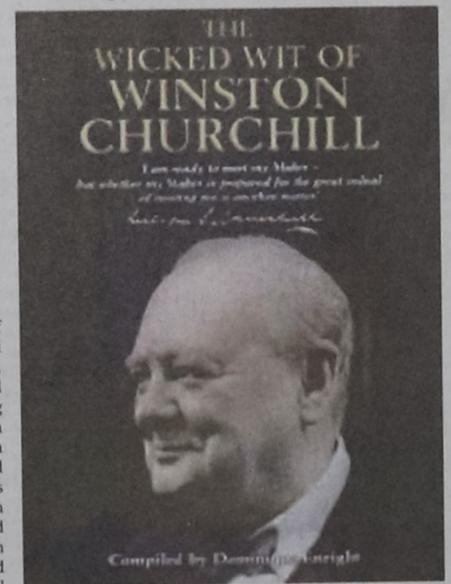
POLITICS without repartee and politicians without wit can often turn out to be an abrasive concoction. And it is especially in these present, some would say mediocre, times that a sense of humour in politicians remains acute by its conspicuous absence. We are rather unfortunate that ours happens to be an age when, for much of the time, we laugh at politicians rather than laugh with them. That is the pity, given that there used to be a time when men like Pilo Mody, Atal Behari Vajpayee, Syed Badrudduja, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan injected good doses of humour into their politics and left people feeling pretty light-hearted, even jocular, about conditions that were otherwise quite weighty.

It was such humour, an abundance of it, which shone through Winston Spencer Churchill. Well, he may have been a bad student in school and then, paradoxically, a tough wartime leader for Britain. But he was also a clear thinker and a good writer, as his speeches and his books were to prove so conclusively. What was, however, an even bigger quality in Churchill was his natural ability to lighten up a serious situation through barbs that left everyone around rolling in laughter. Imagine the wit that comes with the ego when he describes himself thus: "We are all worms, but I do believe I am a glow worm." It is such gems of humour that Dominique Enright packs her work with. All too often, the Churchillianisms, if one may so use the term, that come through this collection leave one most amazed at the sheer ability of one individual to produce such a long stream of humour. Think of the time in 1900, when Britain's future prime minister went about seeking votes in an upcoming parliamentary election. As he goes around shaking hands with some constituents, one of them snaps at him: "Vote for you? I would rather vote for the devil." An unfazed Churchill responds, "I know, but if your friend decides not to run, can I count on your support?" Such repartee, you can be sure, will leave even a hardened detractor entertaining second thoughts about his political position.

Sometimes there was the obviously rude that came into Churchill's attitude to others. Remember that snide comment on half-naked fakirs when it came to speaking of Mahatma Gandhi? Churchill did not even spare his political contemporaries in Britain. "An empty cab drew up outside 10 Downing Street, and out of it stepped Clement Attlee." That was how he denigrated a foremost politician of his day. Once, as a loud lawmaker was busy talking on the phone, Churchill asked his young aide about the identity of the parliamentarian. The aide shortly returned, to tell him who it was and that he was talking to Scotland. "I know", replied Churchill, "but ask him to use the phone." In one of the more memorable of his wartime speeches, Churchill would declaim: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets. we shall fight in the hills

..." As a loud roar of appreciation went up, it is said Churchill muttered to a colleague nearby, "And we'll fight them with the butt ends of broken beer bottles because that's bloody well all we've got."

The rudeness was sometimes of staggering proportions. Asked by a young MP if the maiden speech he had just made in Parliament should have contained more fire in it, Churchill replied coldly, "What you should have done is



The Wicked Wit of Winston Churchill  
Compiled by Dominique Enright  
Michael O'Mara Books Limited

put the speech into the fire." His opinion of Arthur Balfour was searing: "If you wanted nothing done, Arthur Balfour was the best man for the task. There was no equal to him." The British leader had nothing but intense dislike for France's Charles de Gaulle, who in turn was not willing to be treated as anyone but an equal by other Allied wartime leaders. This is what Churchill said of De Gaulle: "He looks like a female llama who has just been surprised in her bath." He was forever on an assault on Attlee, who to him was "a sheep in sheep's clothing." And he was scathing about Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Mikhaikovich

Molotov: "I have never seen a human being who more perfectly represented the modern concept of a robot." He was also clear about the way he felt about Stafford Cripps, London's ambassador to Moscow in December 1940. Cripps simply was "a lunatic in a country of lunatics." Of US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Churchill came forth with a mere three words, "Dull, Duller, Dulles."

There were of course people, generally individuals at the receiving end of Churchill's attacks or irritated by his wisecracks, who sometimes hit back. One of these was his American ally, President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The US leader once blandly remarked, "Churchill has a hundred ideas a day, of which four are good ideas." Lord Beaverbrook was merciless. Churchill, he stated, "has the habit of breaking the rungs of any ladder he puts his foot on." Aneurin Bevan had this to say about the man: "He is a man suffering from petrified adolescence." Margot Asquith, Herbert Asquith's second wife, was certainly harsh in her view of the wartime prime minister. Churchill, according to her, "would kill his own mother just so he could use her skin to make a drum to beat his own praises."

Despite all the attacks on him, of course in response to his attacks on others, there was no mistaking the natural sense of humour that flowed through Churchill. As a young MP in 1900, he sported a moustache. A woman soon came up to him and told him loudly, "There are two things I don't like about you, Mr. Churchill --- your politics and your moustache." Churchill's satisfying retort must have left the woman floored: "My dear madam, pray do not disturb yourself. You are not likely to come into contact with either." In his advancing years, Churchill was confronted by his young grandson, who wanted to know if he was really the greatest man in the world. And this was the reply: "Of course I am the greatest man in the world. Now buzz off!"

Dominique Enright includes, for good measure, a reasonable number of Churchillian epigrams at the end of the book. They remain proof of the wisdom that once underlined the career of politicians, and not just in Britain. Here, as you might see, are some nuggets of ever brilliant wisdom:

Never trust a man who has not a single redeeming vice. A nation that forgets its past has no future. Never stand so high upon a principle that you cannot lower it to suit the circumstances. You will never get to the end of the journey if you stop to shy a stone at every dog that barks. Perhaps it is better to be irresponsible and right than to be responsible and wrong. Civil servants --- no longer servants, no longer civil.

And there we are, somewhat chastened by thoughts of how men in times past gave vent to their thinking.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

# AT A GLANCE

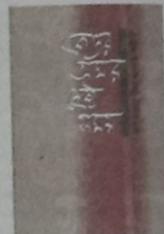
বিজয় দিবসের পর  
বঙ্গবন্ধু ও বাংলাদেশ



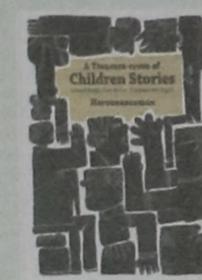
Bijoy Dibosh-er Por Bangabandhu  
O Bangladesh  
Abdul Matin  
Radical Asia Publications

Abdul Matin is here once again with his incisive study of Bangabandhu and the times he dominated. In this new work, the writer brings into focus the manifold problems the Father of the Nation was confronted with in post-war Bangladesh, especially from quarters intent on undermining his government and the newly emergent state.

Ekattar Amar Shreshtho Shomoy  
Anwar ul Alam Shahid  
Shahitya Prakash



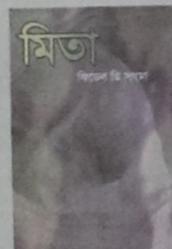
The War of Liberation remains a defining point with the Bengali nation. In these memoirs, the guerrilla who is today a former diplomat speaks of his contributions in the struggle that would lead to national freedom. Along the way, he brings us in touch, once more, with the men who shaped those halcyon moments in our lives.



A Treasure Trove of Children  
Stories  
Haroonzaman  
Adorn Publication

Haroonzaman has been a prolific writer of short stories and poetry as well as a translator. In this splendid collection, he brings before children as also to those who have outgrown childhood a selection of stories that reflect the nature of Bengali writing. Of course, they are translations. The translator has done his job well.

Mita  
Fidel D. Sangma  
Mita Prakashani



A collection of short stories that leaves you impressed. Sangma's language is not Bengali and yet he employs it with finesse. And the stories? They are a reflection of the various moods the writer finds himself in. Love, sadness, dreams and a sense of loneliness are the principal features of his narrative.

# RE-READINGS

## All about love and travel

### Israt Sawda loses herself in a story

ERICH Segal's *Oliver's Story* is a popular romantic book from one who was born 1937 in New York as the son of a rabbi. He is a graduate of Harvard and wrote texts for musicals. Today he lives in New Haven and is a professor for literature in New York.

When *Love Story* was published in 1970 it became a number one bestseller. The book was translated into 23 different languages. Over three million people saw the film when it came into the cinemas in the same year.

This huge success inspired Segal to write a sequel in 1977 called *Oliver's Story*, which was equally turned into a movie a year later, once again starring Ryan O'Neal as Oliver.

Oliver Barrett IV is a 30 year-old young man, who has finished law school and works as a lawyer at Jonas & March in New York. In the previous book, *Love Story*, readers are introduced in Oliver's student life. He has many mental differences and problems with his father (Oliver Barrett III). He marries a girl called Jenny Cavilleri. At the end of the novel she dies because of leukaemia. Oliver doesn't want to meet anyone, his social life becomes empty and seems to be irretrievably destroyed.

Years have gone by. Oliver is still single. He often meets Phil (his father-in-law) and they do different things together. Phil's favorite topic of conversation is to convince Oliver to remarry as soon as possible. But he is the only social contact he really has (apart from his parents with whom he had reconciled). Business is going well.

Then he meets a girl called Joanna Stein, but there is no real closer relationship developing between them.

Jogging through the park he later gets to know Marcie Binnendale (rich owner of a big clothing shop chain) and there is enormous passion coming up by the time. They begin to love each other. Oliver's feelings have come back. He feels great and never wants to lose Marcie. The couple spends very much time together (they have different excursions, trips, sports, dinners, romantic evenings...). Everything seems splendid. But then well-known differences and problems happen between them, which do not come up immediately but develop and slowly and get more important by the time: Marcie is very busy and Oliver is very busy. She has to travel all around the world to present her collections. So they often cannot see each other for a week or even more, which is not too beneficial for their love.

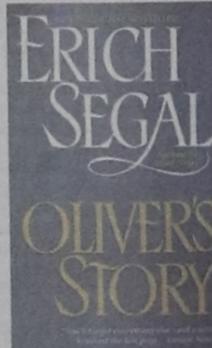
On top of it Oliver learns (during a common travel to Hong Kong) that the Binnendales' purveyors (which are employed by Marcie) employ very young children (and influence them to work). The adult workers agree upon sharing the pay if they all may work. All this is called sweatshop labour. Oliver - years ago - (still at Harvard) had learned that the Barretts' money came from sweatshop labor, too (since then he had dissociated with the Barretts' business). Because of this he separates (very painfully: "You are a cold and heartless bitch" from Marcie (as she finds this business practice normal: "Everyone does it.")

In the end Oliver becomes senior partner in his father's company as his father is going to retire. He comes to the conclusion that he would be alive if Jenny were still alive (he feels physically dead)

At first you'd rather say the ending was bad. Oliver gets to know a very nice girl (Marcie) they love each other very much. Oliver has overcome his grief and his (social) life is back. And then: The insurmountable differences come up and destroy the marvelous feelings Oliver had during the past 2 years. He's single again. Lonely. A one-way street.

But then you might change your mind: Difficulties with Oliver Barrett III had destroyed the father-son relation (which was slightly repaired after Jenny's death). We learn that the origin of the Barretts' money stems from sweatshop labor. Oliver completely disagrees with that. That's why the situation in Hong Kong escalated. At that moment it's when these 'insurmountable differences' come up again. Oliver has stuck to his principles. So good ending or semi-bad ending (depends on the reader.)

Israt Sawda will be pursuing higher education in the United Kingdom.



Oliver's Story  
Erich Segal  
HarperCollins