



## THE TEXT, THE AUTHOR AND THE HISTORY: A RE-READING OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S LORD JIM IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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### Abstract

*Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim is one of its creators most revealing autobiographical fiction. It evolves out of a rich matrix of personal, historical and literary sources. Through the parallel reading of Lord Jim and the history in which the novel was written, we have observed that Conrad used many materials for the source of the characters and the incidents which take place in the novel and that the thematic veins of the novel agree with either Conrad's own life both as a Polish and an English seaman or the incidents that took place in history, and the historical figures. In the creation of the other characters in Lord Jim, Conrad made use of the actual people; and in the creation of the setting of the novel, he made use of the names and the characteristics of the real places which he visited in the Malay Archipelago.*

*Lord Jim* is a novel which is partly based on his own experiences and partly based on the actual events, people and the imperial world, the information about which he gained through reading, travelling and hearsay. This article aims to read Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* in a historical context and also to analyse the interaction between the text, the author and the history. This is also an attempt to indicate that there is always a close relation between the history of the author and literary texts and non-literary texts written in the same period.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) grew up amid political unrest in Russian occupied Poland. After about twenty years, he began his career at sea as an apprentice in the French merchant marine. Then he joined the British Merchant Navy and settled in England in 1894. Though he was a man of letters before he wrote his first novel, his writing career began with the publication of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* in 1895. Conrad then gave up his job in the merchant marine. Throughout his writing career, he wrote seventeen novels, three plays, two memoirs, many letters and short stories.

Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* can be studied to establish the relationship between Conrad's life and the novel, between the historical context of the novel and its content. By so doing, we aim to emphasize history as the focal point of reading of *Lord Jim*. It is one of the best examples of Conrad's complex sources including autobiographical elements rooted in his Polish background and his life as a seaman. The novel also includes specific suggestions to actual people and events, and to the imperial world in which Conrad lived and the colonial setting, especially the Malay Archipelago, where Conrad sailed as a British merchant seaman

Conrad wrote *Lord Jim* at a time when imperialism brought two different phases of history together. The imperialist culture produced both heroic individualists like Jim, and a sordid narrative of greed, conflict and exploitation which seemed under no individual's control. The world was beginning to be alien and inscrutable at the point of imperialism. Written in such a historical moment, *Lord Jim* presents a conflict between romance and idealism. The main character, Jim is represented, on one hand, as "one of us" (69), as a representative of imperial Britain, on the other, as a failure who abandons his duty as a seaman. He became the root cause for the destructions of his best friend and of himself and thus leads the Patusan village to leaderlessness and deprivation. In the novel Imperialism was represented as a Romantic idealism having a vision of a transformed earth in the travel and adventure accounts of the time.

The novel contains the story of a young Englishman who disgraces himself as a sailor in the merchant navy but later compensates for his disgrace by becoming the effective benevolent ruler of a Malay community. The novel may be divided into two: The first part, from the beginning to chapter XIX, is generally called the *Patna* episode, and the second part, from chapter XIX onwards is called the Patusan episode. The *Patna* section describes the story of a young sailor, Jim, romantic and dreaming of heroic adventures, is suddenly confronted with the temptation of his life while serving as chief mate on board an old steamer, *Patna*. On her way across the Indian Ocean, the ship touched some floating derelict. When the engines are stopped, her condition seems so precarious that the disreputable gang serving as officers decide to clear out as quickly and noiselessly as possible, under the cover of a dark night, leaving the eight hundred Muslim pilgrims on board to their fate. Jim does not mean to accompany four other white men of the crew – the German skipper and three engineers. But in a moment of excitement, and urged by a voice in the darkness calling him to jump, Jim deserts the *Patna* in the firm belief that she is already sinking under his feet. They are picked up by a ship, and as to the abandoned vessel, it is sighted and towed to Aden by a French gunboat. A court of inquiry is held. Jim is the only officer to give evidence at the Official Inquiry because the skipper has fled and the two surviving engineers are in hospital. The officers of the ship, Jim included, have their certificates cancelled.



The narrator, Marlow has his first sight of Jim when he attends the Official Inquiry into the desertion of the *Patna*. Marlow himself is a middle-aged merchant seaman, a seasoned, good-natured, mature man, who is immediately attracted by Jim's appearance. Jim seems to be a gentleman, upright, good-looking, and yet has clearly betrayed that solidarity. After Jim has been sentenced to the loss of his certificate of seamanship, which means the loss of his livelihood, since he is penniless and has no training other than that of an officer of the merchant marine, Marlow comforts him and tries to help him by finding jobs. Nevertheless, Jim finds it impossible to live it down in spite of the sympathetic support of friends. Jim's extreme sensitivity over the *Patna* scandal makes him a difficult person to help, since whenever the fact that he was mate of the *Patna* becomes known, he throws up his current employment and moves on. Wandering from port to port, and chased everywhere by the echoes of a past which he dares not face, he is finally sent to Patusan by a friend of Marlow's, Stein. Stein is an enterprising Bavarian trader and also a famous collector of insects. Patusan is a Malay settlement in Borneo where Jim is to replace as Stein's agent, and where there is no risk of the *Patna* story becoming known.

The story of the Patusan section describes that forlorn corner of the East where Jim's arrival means the beginning of a New Era because Patusan is the place, where Jim transforms his past somewhat passive and failed life into a romantic and heroic success, and where Jim soon exercises a great authority over the natives. With the help of Jewel, a half-caste girl with whom he falls in love, he subjugates Cornelius, Jewel's step-father. With the aid of Doramin, a prominent trader, and his son Dain Waris, who becomes Jim's closest friend, he defeats and controls both the nominal ruler of Patusan, the Rajah Allang, and a piratical Arab trader, Sherif Ali, who has hitherto been exploiting the place. Thus, Jim lives for some time in the illusion of having mastered his fate, of having forgotten his past.

After two years, Marlow visits Jim in Patusan and sees the success he has made of his life and his happiness with Jewel. After another two years, Marlow learns that everything has gone wrong: Gentleman Brown, an English adventurer turned pirate, has arrived with his half-starved followers looking for plunder in Patusan. Jim's illusions are shattered by the arrival of this white outcast. One of Brown's men gratuitously kills a Patusan man. It would be easy for Jim to disarm him and send him away, or, in case of resistance, to let him die of starvation. But Jim does nothing. Despite Brown's obvious viciousness, Jim makes the fatal mistake of allowing him and his companions to go free. Overcome by a curious weakness, a sort of identification of himself with this despicable British, Jim remains passive. When they move down the river, Brown and his followers are enabled, by the vindictive Cornelius, to make a cowardly attack on a group of Jim's Malays. Brown shoots some volleys into them. Dain Waris is killed. In the end, Doramin, Dain's father, shoots Jim in the mistaken belief that Jim has betrayed his adopted people and is directly responsible for his son's death; and since Jim has already felt that his attitude is responsible for the tragedy, he delivers himself up to the relatives of the victims, who kill him.

Conrad wrote the novel *Lord Jim* based on a sea disaster involving a pilgrim ship that was abandoned at sea by her captain and officers. The *Patna* episode appropriates from the pages of the news of the *Jeddah* incident of 1880, which was widely discussed in the British press in terms of issues of conduct and Western ideals. (Henricksen, 85) The case of the pilgrim ship *Jeddah* was one of the most notorious scandals in the East of the 1880's. It was believed that Conrad must have read the reports of the *Jeddah* incident in the London newspapers in 1880 as the desertion of the *Jeddah* by her European master and officers was a scandal discussed in London as well as in Singapore. The event was fully reported in *The Times*, and Conrad, who was in London at the time, probably read about the scandal; and later he must have heard it discussed in nautical circles, especially when he was in Singapore in 1883. In his Author's Note Conrad refers to the pilgrim ship episode. Here it is clear that the *Jeddah* case appealed to Conrad and became the inspiration for *Lord Jim*:

My first thought was of a short story, concerned only with the pilgrim ship episode; nothing more. And that was a legitimate conception. After writing a few pages, however, I became for some reason discontented and I laid it aside for a time [...] It was only then that I perceived that the pilgrim ship episode was a good starting-point for a free and wandering tale; that it was an event, too, which could conceivably colour the whole 'sentiment of existence' in a simple and sensitive character. (Conrad b: 31)

Two important circumstances, inherent in the actual incident, were that the captain and the officers deserted the ship when the *Jeddah*'s sinking became an imminent danger, and that the ship did not sink. One of the complications in the *Jeddah* case was the inadequacy of the ship's boats to take off the 900 pilgrims. Only a small number of those on board the *Jeddah* could hope to be saved. Such a situation demanded that the captain should go down with his ship. But in the *Jeddah* case this first code of the sea is dishonoured. The strains inherent in the position of the captain and the officers are projected in *Lord Jim* and it is this crucial involvement that bothers Jim later, and causes him to ask Marlow:

What would you have done? You are sure of yourself – aren't you? What would you do if you felt now – this minute – the house here move, just move a little under your chair? Leap! By heavens! You would take one spring from where you sit and land in that clump of bushes yonder. (Conrad 85).



Consequently, the *Jeddah* and *Patna* stories run parallel in the fate of the ship after the desertion, and Conrad seems to be consciously using the *Jeddah* story and incorporating some of his experiences on the *Palestine* into the *Patna* story.

The consensus on the primary source material for the second part of *Lord Jim* is that the whole Eastern world Conrad knew as a seaman in the East of the 1880s is the genesis of the second part of the novel. Conrad had brief voyages through the Malay Archipelago during the last half of 1887 and these voyages “gave Conrad the richest literary material from an unknown part of the world and provided the inspiration for *Lord Jim*” (76-77) comments Meyers in his book *Joseph Conrad: A Biography*. For example, the setting for the second part of the novel has roots in the actual places Conrad knew in the East. An Eastern River suggests the Berau River, and Patusan, a native settlement and a European trading post is a reference to the actual trading post on the bank of the Berau River. Conrad called Patusan an area as “one of the lost, forgotten, unknown places of the earth” (243) and “Berau was, and still is, this”. (Sherry 119) Conrad’s fictional account of the area is “compatible with the sight of the actual settlement”. (Sherry 120) Marlow describes the coast of Patusan thus:

[It] is straight and sombre, and faces a misty ocean [...] Swampy plains open out at the mouth of rivers, with a view of jagged blue peaks beyond the vast forests. In the offing a chain of islands, dark, crumbling shapes, stand out in the everlasting sunlit haze like the remnants of a wall breached by the sea. (184)

Finally, it can be said that travel and adventure books provided Conrad, for his novel *Lord Jim*, with information about the East and the incidents there, which could not have been obtained either from observation and hearsay during the period when he was at Berau and Bulungan.

Conrad was able to take not only Malay names, but suggestions for Malay characters and their histories and backgrounds, as well as obtaining information about the attitudes they would be likely to have towards each other and each race, and especially towards the white man. Conrad drew upon “his seaman’s experiences for intellectual capital – for curious facts, human types, and innumerable impressions of individuals and places”; besides, “his Polish background supplied him with a deep emotional and moral power”. (Megroz 85)

As Conrad did in his *Heart of Darkness*, in *Lord Jim*, he used incidents from the real life to illustrate the environment in which the characters he created could perform and react. By means of this source study, we have observed that the novel is partly based on true events. Conrad combined references from real life with the theme of betrayal through his character Jim, who is haunted by the guilt of cowardice and forced to face his own past tragically.

Conrad, once again, presents us the tension between individual self-interest and the demands of the prevailing social organization. We have observed that he made more use of the other’s experiences than his own in *Lord Jim*. It can be argued that Conrad, through time, became so sensitive a writer toward the others’ experiences that he could draw upon them very skilfully in his novel. Thus, we can conclude that his fiction is a reflection of his intellectual development.

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