

The Imperial Quest and Modern Memory from Conrad to Greene

J. M. Rawa

LITERARY CRITICISM AND CULTURAL THEORY

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For Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)

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Modern Passages and Double Turns

William Blake points out that “the foundation of empire is art and science . . . empire follows art and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose” (*Selected Poetry and Prose* 447). This book speaks to Blake’s point by exploring the relationships between narrative and imperium in the context of Western Modernism. Many scholarly works have examined the relationships between narrative and imperium in the tomes of empire; however, this study focuses on very Modern works: *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American*. These novels have much in common and unquestionably deal with passage and transformation in the problematic context of empire. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said observes that “a great deal of recent criticism has concentrated on narrative fiction, yet very little attention has been paid to its position in the history and world of empire” (xii). This study connects *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* to the history and world of empire by exploring a key trope that Northrop Frye calls the “monomyth” of Western narrative: the quest. The Euro-American quest is a manifestation of the archetypal quest; however, it has also been fashioned by the prevailing ideologies of Western culture. The *Western quest* often emerges from the context of imperialism and thus may become synecdochical for imperialism. The *imperial quest* is predicated on fantasies of invasion, objectification, and aggression; in consequence, the imperial quest creates links between culture and imperialism—in this case between the trope and Euro-American Imperialism. Gayatri Spivak reminds us that “the role of literature in cultural representation should not be ignored” (“Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” 269). This study examines the quest trope as a vehicle of cultural representation in Modern narrative. The striking thing about these novels and the most important point of this study is that they simultaneously reinscribe *and* subvert the

imperial quest and thus the imperial project. *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* are not tomes of empire like the Victorian Romances of Alfred Lord Tennyson and William Morris or “the plain tales” of race and code by Rudyard Kipling and Rider Haggard. They are, instead, remarkably Modern and subversive narratives: they participate in the revolutionary projects of early and high Modernism and are often in marked opposition to imperial praxis. Yet they are also profoundly influenced by the deep ideological and metaphoric structures of Western culture. Many theorists—like Hannah Arendt, Louis Althusser, and Frederic Jameson—discuss the processes by which cultural hegemony reproduces itself. *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* often participate in such processes by reinscribing aggressive imperial gestures and vexed Oriental-Occidental juxtapositions. On the other hand, these Modern novels also endeavor to “make it new” stylistically and ideologically. Modernism emphasizes experimental form but also suggests a revolutionary break from established orthodoxies and an experimental investigation into the future (Groden et al 512). Modernism involves an interrogation and reevaluation of the past—and certainly the imperial past. Said points out that “many of the prominent characteristics of Modernist culture, which we have tended to derive from purely internal dynamics in Western society and culture, include a response to the external pressures on culture from imperium” (CI 188). I propose that it is possible to read *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* as artifacts of empire that reinscribe the Western eye and Western imperialism *and* as radical examples of Modern resistance to imperialism and its prerequisites. These contradictory readings—based on a post-structural appreciation for the possibilities of *écriture*—are equally worthy of consideration.

Why is it important to examine these Modern narratives? For pragmatic and productive reasons. These Modern narratives are (as many critics like Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, and Sara Suleri clearly show) not unadulterated, but they serve a valuable purpose all the same. They both construct and deconstruct the deep metaphoric structures of Western culture and Western imperialism. They dramatize the incomplete yet subversive impulse to displace the persuasions of empire. They deal with the epistemological dilemmas that problematize the transformation of consciousness and thus the public sphere. Moreover, in an age in which imperialism and neo-imperialism appear to be ascendant, we must not disregard texts that show the West trying to check itself—especially on this score. I propose that exploring these Modern texts is advantageous at this

vexed historical moment. This project explores ideological questions that were relevant during the Age of Empire and are relevant in the Postmodern Era. These epochs have all given rise to great powers determined to gain and sustain ascendancy. Imperial powers have always exploited rhetoric to manufacture consent for the persuasions of empire. This has had an impact on narrative and consequently produced a significant conversation about the same topic in which I would like to situate these texts.

Gertrude Stein describes the Modern world as a “space of time that is filled always filled with moving” (*GMMA* 239–58). *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* express just this sense of movement: they are based on dramatic physical quests that pivot on movement from imperial, metropolitan centers to colonial spaces. Colonialism and imperialism (industrialized, mechanized, and modernized) certainly provided penetrating vehicles for expanded movement abroad—as we can see in many early Modern works like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Moreover, voyages, expeditions, and passages overseas became increasingly attractive after the Great War. In *Abroad*, Paul Fussell observes that many soldiers longed to escape the troglodyte world of the trenches for other worlds far away: “‘far, far from Ypres I long to be,’ they sang, and if for some the land of their dreams at the end of the long trail was simply ‘home,’ for others it was distinctly ‘abroad’”(4). Fussell notes that the desire to escape the “grey world” (Bowles, *SS* 16) for a “warm world somewhere else” (4) contributed to literary diasporas that many have associated with Modernism; from Corfu, Lawrence Durrell asks (in 1936), “is there no one writing at all in England now?” (11). The wandering novelists of the post-war period as well as the wandering subjects of these post-war narratives (*A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American*) are representative of the lost generation that Malcolm Cowley describes in *Exile’s Return*: “they were seceding from the old and yet could adhere to nothing new; they groped their way toward another scheme of life, as yet undefined” (9). This book explores the ways in which the representative narrative subjects in *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American*, groping their way toward another scheme of life, recognize and critique the imperialism that pervades the cultures in which they participate and cultures abroad. Marcel Proust remarks that “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” This book endeavors to determine if the narrative subjects see with new eyes as a result of passage, expatriation, and self-imposed exile triggered by imperial expansion or post-war malaise. These quests certainly hinge on keen forms of observation; however, do

they lead to the rejection of imperialism and point to broadening of consciousness that is enduring or substantiated by symbolic action? This book thus explores the concept of transformation of consciousness (transformation that can be progressive, digressive, or regressive) in the context of Western Modernism. The archetypal quest has long been linked to the concept of transformation in culture and narrative for “the stories of the wanderings of the hero contain many metaphors for the interior process of transformation” (Metzner 111).

Some scholars have criticized *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* for narrative practices that they associate with cultural imperialism. In “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” Chinua Achebe argues that *Heart of Darkness* (a novella about the horrors of European colonialism) projects the image of Africa as “the other world, the antithesis of Europe and therefore civilization” (261). There is a dynamic on-going debate—as Frederick Jameson points out—about Conrad’s political vision (*PU* 209) as well as on-going debates about the ideological tensions in the other narratives. Sara Suleri criticizes Forster for engaging in “representation as a mode of recolonization” (*The Rhetoric of English India* 169), and Nirad C. Chaudhuri notes that *A Passage to India* (a novel that critiques British Imperialism) is full of Orientalist stereotypes: “Aziz as well as his friends . . . are all toadies” (“Passage to and from India” 20–22). Ralph M. Coury argues that “what has been neglected or scarcely emphasized in *The Sheltering Sky* is the link between Bowles’s vision and aspirations and the history of Orientalism” (“Paul Bowles and Orientalism” 209). Evelyn Mendoza observes that *The Quiet American* (a novel that critiques American imperialism) stereotypes Asian women and that this problem is endemic in Western plots that pivot on love relationships between Asian women and Western men (“The Yum Yum Syndrome”). Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Paul Bowles, and Graham Greene were not parochial individuals; moreover, they (like D. H. and Frieda Lawrence, Robert Graves, Lawrence Durrell, Jean Rhys, and so on) were in flight from or open rebellion against their societies. Conrad circumnavigated the globe as a ship’s captain, Forster spent years in India, Bowles absconded to Tangiers, and Greene trekked all over the world as a journalist; ultimately, however, they were of the West and their novels reinscribe Western praxis on many levels. Terry Eagleton reminds us that “every discursive process is inscribed in ideological relations and will be internally molded by their pressure” (“Ideology” 195). The Modern novels in question are undeniably influenced by Western ways of looking at the world. They rely on language inscribed in ideological relations and employ

tropes distorted by historical preconceptions about Western superiority. They can't be quarantined from the Western matrix.

On the other hand, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* do critique imperialism—and in rigorous ways. These avant-garde narratives assess critically via irony, emphasize the importance of individual conscience (rather than collective codes), and push positive social imperatives. Said queries, “How can one study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective?” (CI 24). This is a judicious question and one which Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Paul Bowles, and Graham Greene grapple with and thematize in their novels. Paul Armstrong suggests that knowledge is always from a perspective and thus distances others because perspective is not identical with what it seeks to know (“Reading India”). Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Paul Bowles, and Graham Greene stage the epistemological problems that Said's question and Armstrong's point raise within the very discourse they offer us. The representative characters in these novels desire to understand alterity but misread the paysage and the people that they encounter because their knowledge is inescapably inadequate. In the Lyotard-Habermas debate, Jean François Lyotard emphasizes the difficulty of overcoming perspective while Jurgen Habermas emphasizes the possibility of consensus. *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* explore the difficulty of overcoming perspective yet also position authentic exchange and social justice as desirable ideals. In “The Economy of the Manichean Allegory,” Abdul JanMohamed places colonial texts in two categories. The *Imaginary Text* (like *Out of Africa*) “fetishizes a fixed opposition between the self and the native” (19). The *Symbolic Text* is “grounded more in egalitarian imperatives” (18). The *Symbolic Text* examines “the specific individual and cultural differences between Europeans and natives . . . to reflect on the efficacy of European values, assumptions, and habits in contrast to those of the indigenous cultures” (19). JanMohamed regards *A Passage to India* and *Heart of Darkness* as *Symbolic* rather than *Imaginary* texts. I concur and further propose that *The Sheltering Sky* and *The Quiet American* fall into the *Symbolic* category. These novels manage to “severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of the dominant culture” (JanMohamed 18–22), and this is no mean feat. JanMohamed notes that this kind of critique is necessary to rapprochement between self and Other (18–22). *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* show us the ways in which we are constrained by culture as well as the ways in which we are able to break from culture since “no vision, any more than any social system, has total hegemony over its domain” (Said, CI 186).

Heart of Darkness, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* can thus be deconstructed and reconstructed to demonstrate that they are simulatenously artifacts of empire that reinscribe the Western eye as well as radical examples of Modern resistance to imperialism. Malcolm Cowley observes that the Moderns belonged to “a generation in transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created” (*ER* 9) and this may account for some of the double turns in these narratives. Sara Suleri observes the dynamics of the double turn in *The Rhetoric of English India*. She calls the binarism that characterizes some contemporary critique of alterity into question, for interpreting “the configurations of colonialism in the idiom of such ineluctable divisions is to deny the impact of narrative on a productive disordering of the binary dichotomies” (*REI*). Suleri’s observation is relevant to *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American*, for these novels simultaneously expose the historical Western impulse to seize the subject position as well as the radical Modern impulse to subvert the ideology of the dominant culture. Some of the typical characteristics of the imperial ethos surface in the Euro-American quests in these narratives; however, *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* also rework the quest in interesting ways. Such double turns should come as no surprise. Said reminds us that “we have learned a great deal about culture and its productivity, its diversity of components, its critical and often contradictory energies, its radically antithetical characteristics, and above all its rich worldliness and complicity with imperial conquest and liberation” (*CI* 320). This two-way pull is perhaps inescapable in Modern narratives informed by (yet in rebellion against) Western culture.

Jaques Derrida considers the difference between “A” and “Not-A” to explore the intertextual weave of tropes (as well as gaps, tensions, and contradictions) in texts. I will use the same approach to note the ways in which these Modern narratives both reinscribe and subvert the imperial quest scheme. Each novel introduces a Western hero who embarks upon a quest characterized by fantasies of invasion and objectification; imposes the opposition of ‘West’ and ‘Non-West’ to establish the Western subject as central and the indigene as Other; captures and represents alterity in problematic ways; and reinscribes some forms of hegemonic discourse. *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *The Quiet American* reinscribe the Western quest; however, they also interrogate it. Each novel also emphasizes the unstable identities of narrators and characters in a direct or meta-narrational fashion and thus points to their construction in culture; deconstructs the idea of the Western subject as central and the