

# Pegasus

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## Contents

*Pain Prolonged: The Suffering  
Animal Motif in the Short  
Story*

*The Lagoon: The Territory of  
the Oriental*

*The Lagoon: What Silence  
Meant*

## Contributors

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Manindra Chandra College.

We welcome Dr. Lily Law,  
our new Head of the  
Department.

We also acknowledge with  
gratitude the help we received  
from Prof. Arindam  
Dasgupta. The *logo* he  
designed for the department  
we display here in  
thankfulness.



## Foreword

Contrary to apprehensions and expectations, the visit of the Peer Team to the college last March was a pleasurable experience. Our department was warmly praised by the Team. *Pegasus* was a major factor in our success. We presented each member of the Peer Team with a bound copy of all the numbers of *Pegasus* so far published. They were visibly impressed and happy.

Incidentally, we now have a few such sets with us. If anyone is interested in collecting a set, please get in touch with us.

*Pegasus* is approaching a landmark of sorts. The next issue will be our twentieth number. To celebrate, we are planning a very special issue which will publish articles on the recent additions to the Calcutta University Honours syllabus. We request all our regular contributors and readers to write for us on the newly added short stories and on Indian writing in English. Please also be kind enough to request others to write for us. We will be happy to look at all articles sent to us.

We have had quite a few compliments coming our way and we are beholden to our faithful contributors and readers.

Though the students enrolled in the First Year Honours this year have already completed two months of class, *Pegasus* welcomes them to the college and to the department. We hope together we will spend an excellent two-year stint in the college. We also proffer advance congratulations to the students who will do well in the results of the Part One examination due to be published on October 4, 2005.

In course of the last one year, our department has seen a number of changes. Prof. Arindam Dasgupta and Prof. Sonali Bhattacharya left the department. Professors Sudeshna Basu, Subarna Bhattacharya and Piyali Ghosh Sirkar have joined to fill in the breach. They have already proved their worth as teachers.

We warmly commend the editorial assistance rendered by Prof. Reena Sinha.

Unfortunately, it has been a while since we last published an article by a student. We call upon all our students to rectify that lacunae.

Teachers and students from other institutions are invited to send us articles properly typed and not longer than 1500 words. Articles not selected will be returned if accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelopes. Send us notices and news of literary activity. Articles can be sent by e-mail to:

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# ***Pain Prolonged: The Suffering Animal Motif in the Short Story***

## **Sumita Banerjee**

*The breath of the Beast  
Came in low moans*

Stevie Smith

Suffering, it seems, is the badge of their tribe. Ralph Hodgson's poetic reminder regarding 'tamed and shabby tigers, dancing dogs and bears, wretched, blind pit ponies, little hunted hares' has fallen on deaf ears. The bells of heaven never did ring with our 'angry prayers'!<sup>1</sup> Today, to add to this list there are seals burnt to cinders in the circus, painful paws pacing filthy claustrophobic cages, trembling heartbeats that fail to dodge the vampire army of poachers and butchers, terrified, cowering creatures milked, branded, sheared and sacrificed with unending regularity. Man having lost his own, appears hell-bent on depriving all other animals of their Emerald Eden as well. Abusing animals is considered our birthright. And so the saga of animal suffering goes on forever.

Yet, there are creative artists among us who have decided to trudge the Green path; they meticulously chronicle the cries of these creatures, the painful agony of a prolonged end for the sake of literature, art or film. Like the Crusader of Assisi, these people of Deep Ecology consider a suffering bird or beast to be one of their own and set about to depict this pain with the greatest concern, consideration and compassion. On analysis, however, these short stories that are sensitive outpourings of animal suffering and pain reveal a unique structure of their own. They are remarkable for their three R's – those of Reduction, Release and Religious, or at times symbolic, overtones. As animal suffering reaches a pitched crescendo, ripples of human suffering stretch across the taut canvas. As the clouds of terrible reality roll across the sky, the shadow falls on the person most closely associated with the suffering beast. Emotional release is accompanied by a sharp reduction, a sort of dwarfing effect.

In Katherine Mansfield's *The Fly*, for instance, a shrinking of the most amazing and immediate kind seems to take place in the boss. A critic recalling Mansfield's description of the boss as 'stout, rosy, five years older'<sup>2</sup> observes, 'He is a boy, a greedy boy whose new office furniture suggests treacle and sausages. And like a boy, he torments the fly.'<sup>3</sup> The artificial electric fire and the snugness of his office are mere compensatory trappings of the boss's icy morgue of an inner world. A world of chilly illusions where 'reel life' projections seem to hound out real life ones:

'And it was strange. Although six years had passed away the boss never thought of the boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his

uniform, asleep for ever.'<sup>4</sup>

In this cold, cold world Woodfield's words combined with the Windsor Castle whisky sets the thaw. And so the reality of death attempts to sneak in. Woodfield, as his name and his preoccupation with the 'nice broad path' around Reggie's grave so deliberately suggests, is more in tune with the natural, and therefore, real world.

From 1918 onwards Mansfield's writings remained abuzz with the images of the fly. Apart from a baby and a group of boys, she even imagined her own self like a dazed, drowned fly that was 'fished out' after being 'dropped' into the milk jug; her losing battle with ill health, and a sadomasochistic father figure are all reflected in what has been described as her ultimate cry against corruption. And corruption is the curse of the fly – the fly that the boss rescues from his inkpot only to drown in ink, drop by drop. The religious overtones cannot be ignored here; in Egypt, the Bible tells us death, destruction and pestilence followed the fly from the bottom of the Nile. The Egyptians hold the fly responsible for ophthalmia, a serious affliction of the eye as well. The boss, by killing this helpless creature, seems to have unleashed a spell of corruption in his own life.

The boy in him gloating over the baby in Woodfield now undergoes a reversal of sorts – Woodfield's stroke afflicted existence, his 'chill old brain', his muddled mental meanderings have also become his. As he loses control over his illusory world he keeps harping on eyesight – 'Look sharp' he tells the fly, 'Look sharp', he tells Macey. The 'painful moments' which finally led to the fly's death releases in him 'a grinding feeling of wretchedness'. The boss is thus stepping back in time – from the boy loaded with the goodies of life to a helpless baby stuck in a pram like Woodfield. One of Woodfield's 'empty' moments so engulfs his mind that he 'felt positively frightened': 'What was it? It was ...for the life of him he could not remember'.<sup>5</sup>

'Flies have a flair for putrefaction'<sup>6</sup> – Mansfield seems to caution her readers as one painful moment of suspense follows another. Suffering soon overwhelms 'the little beggar', 'the draggled fly' and spreads its way to the one 'still going strong, still at the helm'<sup>7</sup>. With the death of the fly the boss loses it all. The supreme commander loses his control. Mansfield thus hints at the possibility of a new face at the end of the line – the long queue of frail figures in their frayed mufflers.

How different in style and treatment is Ranjit Lal's hilarious story 'Have You Washed Your Hands?' Two flies Makhi and Kooda are described against an urban Indian background. When toxic colours have found their way into foodstuff sold outside local school gates, human children suffer from massive

food poisoning and swarms of flies die that afternoon. So desperate is the situation that the flies are forced to seek for food and shelter in a hospital operation theatre:

'Where do we go?' asked Kooda, getting desperate. 'I can't even think of laying eggs anywhere in this city. Everything is so terribly contaminated and polluted. The poor maggots wouldn't even stand a chance.'<sup>8</sup>

No sweetmeat or other shop appears safe to them; a grim reminder of the increasing toxicity of our environment and the threatened Indian masses at large. Though there are no prominent human characters, right through the story there persists the image of suffering, shrunken men. Humanity is reduced thin – 'vilely coloured mithais, violent orange' coloured tandoori chicken, wax polished fruit had taken over everywhere. Even the flies are afraid of the absolutely filthy confectioner's counter!

H. E. Bates calls his protagonist Mrs. Thurlow an ox. In esoteric terms, the ox represents the earth element. Perhaps that is why it was associated with St. Luke whose gospel harps on the sacrifice of Christ. Mrs. Thurlow works hard all her life – slowly but conscientiously building up a little fund for her two boys – only to be robbed by her husband and deserted by her sons who seek the greener pastures of her brother's home. The story ends with what apparently seems a moment of animal helplessness:

She struggled up the hill. The mud of the track seemed to suck at her great boots and hold her down. The wheels of the bicycle seemed as they would not turn.<sup>9</sup>

But this is the ox, for God's sake! The woman has shrunk her feminine instincts but the note of steely determination is still there. In losing her feminine concerns she seems to have gained spiritually. The end of the story finds her Christ-like climbing her own Calvary hill. She falters frequently perhaps, but never completely fails. Like the ox's endless suffering she is doomed to suffer as long as she lives. Physical exhaustion saps her strength, but nothing can ebb her growing ability to hang on.

Like Mrs. Thurlow's, the sufferings of the ox Mahesh in Sarat Chandra's Bengali short story of the same name are painfully prolonged. In the merciless heat of May, while the sky rains fire, the ox suffers from extreme thirst and hunger as its poor but affectionate master Gofur fails to provide for him. The seemingly pious Hindu village tyrants, aware of Mahesh's predicament, will not help! Desperately thirsty, when the animal manages to knock down a pot of water from little Amina, who had enormous trouble procuring it, Gofur in a fit of mindless rage kills his favourite Mahesh. Grief and guilt then turn him into stone. Later in the night Gofur wakes his sleeping daughter Amina informing her that they would immediately start walking for the jute mill at Phulbere. Amina had heard about this much-condemned place from her father before. Neither religion nor women mattered there... Now all was lost. With the killing of Mahesh, Gofur

seemed to have killed the idealist in himself. Gofur's departing words remain a haunting testimony to all the suffering creatures of this earth.

Allah! Punish me as much as you like, but my Mahesh died thirsty. Those who had prevented him from the green grass of your fields, the water that you have provided the thirsty, do not ever forgive them!<sup>10</sup>

Ramesh Chandra Sen's story in Bengali *Shada Ghora* – 'The White Horse' – also depicts terrible deprivations suffered by Surab, the beautiful coach horse who strays from his master during the violent communal riots in Calcutta. Falling into the hands of a bumbling, if well-meaning Hindu group, he is at the point of collapse when his Muslim master tentatively approaches him. Man and animal barely manage to meet, when another bout of communal violence erupts on the city streets. While the group manages to save the old coachman, the horse outside dies of a bullet wound. The owner's grief seems to cloud the entire canvas – other characters are affected as well. 'My Surab'<sup>11</sup>, the concluding words of the coachman in the story, seem to spell the end, not only of the long-suffering white horse, but the end of the coachman's livelihood too. With the death of Surab, or Moon as the white horse was fondly nicknamed by the Hindu group, the light went out of the poor man's life. Fear, fights and flights now clouded his shrunken sky. His question 'When will everything cool down Sir? – ...Fear, not stalk the streets'<sup>12</sup> has not yet found an answer.

George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* describes the prolonged pain and cruel end of a 'mad' elephant in lower Burma. Here the author, a British Raj official, confesses of being 'stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited beasts who tried to make my job impossible.'<sup>13</sup> When he shoots the pachyderm for killing a coolie his bullet made the elephant look 'suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old'<sup>14</sup>. The author claims he had to wait a long time for the beast to die. It took the animal more than one hour to die – 'He was dying, very slowly and in great agony'.<sup>15</sup> All this happened because the author shot the elephant in order to avoid looking a fool. He felt that with a rifle in his hand he was expected to perform. He was a hollow man – 'an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by those yellow faces behind.'<sup>16</sup> As in the case of many other sahibs before him, his face had grown to fit the mask that he was wearing. The man in Orwell shrinks under this façade, the hollow man comes to the foreground.

*The Dog of Titwal* by Saadat Hasan Manto deals with the fate of a friendly dog caught between the frustrations of two groups of soldiers at the Indo-Pak border. While the dog enthusiastically greets the Indian and Pakistani soldiers as humans – all the men expect the dog to choose sides

"Even dogs will now have to decide if they are Indian or Pakistani", one of the soldiers observed.<sup>17</sup>

Unable to kill each other, killing the dog 'became a

game' for the soldiers 'with the dog running round in circles in a state of great terror'<sup>18</sup>. The story concludes with the devastating comment: 'He died a dog's death.'<sup>19</sup> And along with the dog died companionship and compassion. The men had turned into monsters created by war; the metal of their machines, it seems, had sneaked into their solitary souls.

Premchand's Hindi short story *Do Bailon ki Katha*, titled *Heera Moti* on celluloid, depicts the travails of a pair of oxen who suffer increasingly under indifferent or cruel masters until they are sold off to the butcher. Heera and Moti's story ends on a happy but ironic note. Jhuri, their original master, is more passive than his pet oxen. At the end it is Moti who has to use his horns to drive away the bothersome butcher. The concluding dialogue of this tale sums up the story of their prolonged pain:

Heera: Our lives are of no consideration to anyone at all.

Moti: We are only uncomplicated simpletons that's why.<sup>20</sup>

Dumb, unable to organise trade unions, unsuccessful at communicating their distress, useless in voicing their agony, are these 'performing' animals doomed to 'live' in the pages of short stories for ever? The disappearance of the tigers at Sariska, the near-total eradication of the dolphins in the Ganges and the gradual disappearance of vultures, sparrows and crows of our cities are all grimly ominous. As in life, the stories of these animals, whether on the page or on the stage, seldom end on a happy note.

#### Notes:

The quote in the title of the essay is taken from Henry Miller, Preface to Bates's *Seven by Five*, quoted by Michael Thorpe (ed.) *Modern Prose*, O.U.P., Calcutta, 1992, p. 89. The epigraph is from 'The Best Beast of the Fat Stock Show at Earl's Court' by Stevie Smith in George

Macbeth ed. *The Penguin Book of Animal Verse*, Penguin Books, Hammondsworth, 1965, p. 48.

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## The Lagoon: *The Territory of the Oriental* Lily Law

Orientalism may be defined as a discourse of the orient as discovered, described and even in a sense invented by Europe. This discourse aggregates to a 'textual universe', as Edward Said puts it in his remarkable book *Orientalism* (1978). It also refers to the attitudes of the West towards the East; to the Occident looking at the Orient – in fact 'watching' the East and endeavouring to explain and interpret it. Joseph Conrad's short story *The Lagoon* (published in 1897) conveys to me this sense of the western adventurer 'gazing' upon the east as an outsider. Like the 'oriental tale' much in vogue in the 18th and early 19th centuries, *The Lagoon* too is a type of an exotic and extravagant tale of adventure with an 'Eastern' setting, particularly that of the Near East.

Like Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, the white man undertakes an exploration of the exotic Malay islands obviously with the motive of commerce. Nascent racist aloofness of the westerner is apparent in the character of the unnamed 'white man' being a representative of the European navigators in search of colonies in the east.

Indeed the white man's adventures bring him face to face with the geographical and human aspect of Malay. As he penetrates towards the lagoon, the white man passes by impenetrable forests, glittering rivers and narrow creeks, tortuous and deep.

Immense trees soared up, invisible behind the festooned draperies of creepers. Here and

there, near the glistening blackness of the water, a twisted root of some tall tree showed amongst the tracery of small ferns, black and dull, writhing and motionless, like an arrested snake.

As inscrutable as this topography is the mysterious and silent habitat where

every leaf, every bough, every tendril of creeper and every petal of minute blossoms seemed to have been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final.

The silence here may signify the linguistic barrier between the white man and native. Thus the Malay steersman can 'only grunt' and the water 'gurgles' or makes a 'confused murmur'. Perhaps these references point to the historical fact that the native's tongue / language is always suppressed by the coloniser and the latter's foreign one allowed to prevail. However, in this early stage of the white man's exploration the native boatmen can still cry out 'Allah be praised!' clearly indicating their religious alignment as different from the white man's. That the dark and backward orient must be civilised, its people educated and converted, its topography mapped, roads and railways built, and canals dug has been long declared as the westerner's altruistic endeavour to modernise the east, obviously camouflaging the coloniser's more subtle and coercive designs on the timid orient. The mystery and dangerous allurement that the east offers is aptly recreated in *The Lagoon* by Conrad:

Darkness oozed out from between the trees, through the tangled maze of the creepers, from behind the great fantastic and unstirring leaves; the darkness, mysterious and invincible; the darkness scented and poisonous of impenetrable forests.

That the oriental native is steeped in superstition and ghostly fears is expressed when the white man tells us of the reluctance of the polers to spend the night at Arsat's. Although Arsat is less superstitious and more courageous than the other natives present *viz.* in inhabiting an abandoned house open to ghostly presence, he is still a typical oriental in his very 'eastern' proneness to lust and fratricide or so the westerner may presume. Already speaking in the language of the white man, Arsat relates to him the tale of his bygone past – his elopement with Diamelen and the consequent betrayal of his brother. Diamelen herself may be seen to represent the European man's conception of the mysterious, over-sexed and seductive oriental woman. Thus even in death she is open to the gaze of the white man:

She lay still, as if dead; but her big eyes, wide open, glittered in the gloom...her lips were partly open, and on the young face there was the ominous and fixed expression ... The two men stood looking down at her in silence.

The appropriation of the female – body and soul – by the male become by an extension of analogy the appropriation of the native motherland by the foreigner and both the native woman and the

motherland becomes exposed to the European's political and erotic contemplation.

In fact, till the end of the story the white man remains a persona, a style of being, cleansing the land, leading to development and indicating new paths which natives like Arsat are expected to follow. Thus, characteristically Conrad makes the white man the yellow native's friend before whose superior culture and knowledge of science and medicine Arsat surrenders the truth of his terrible past. Believing neither in omen nor in superstition, the white man discourages Arsat's sentimental clinging to his brother's memories. 'There is nothing' says the white man, indicating only a future and not a past.

When Arsat resolves to avenge his brother's murder, the white man offers the course of rationality – 'If you want to come with me, I will wait all the morning.' Thus in *The Lagoon* the native is seen from the vantage point of the white man, the next stage of the conflict between the westerner and the oriental – between Marlow and Kurtz being left to be related in *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad who belonged to the era of 19th century colonisation of the east by the European powers was ambivalent in his attitude to imperialism. While he favoured British imperialism speaking of that 'liberty, which can only be found under the English flag', he strongly reacted against the Belgian occupation of the Congo. The arrogance and hypocrisy of the colonisers is brought out in his mordant tale *An Outpost of Progress* and his most complex novel *Heart of Darkness*. I personally find some of this ambivalence in Conrad's attitude to Arsat, the hero of the tale who follows his own course of action in spite of the white man. At the same time the white man's racial superiority, rationality, quest for adventure and commerce becomes ample reason for his invading the territory of the oriental.

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# The Lagoon: *What Silence Meant*

## Arindam Dasgupta

Mention of the 'white man' at the beginning of the 'The Lagoon' shifts the narrative to the point of view of someone who is non-white; the story is thus set in an atmosphere where the white man is an alien. The name 'Arsat' introduces the character as someone already known to the white man. There is no mistaking the boat, or the fact that it is evening: 'It is late', the white man says.

The reader's visualisation is finally given a context by the mention of the 'Malay'. It is interesting that the white man kept gazing at the wake of the boat while the Malay went on looking fixedly at the river, that lay before them. It is perhaps possible to see a symbolic significance in the way the two people keep looking at two opposite directions, as if because they cannot help being different.

The subsequent lines give such a vivid and beautiful description that it is almost impossible to see anything that the author did not intend his audience to see, or to feel anything other than what he intended them to feel. Although Conrad is known more as a novelist, he had unsuccessfully tried his hand at play-writing. Here we see the playwright setting his stage,<sup>1</sup> and in that respect he is decidedly Shavian.

Though Conrad was among the first people to write about the exotic and the unknown, it is with surprising control that he holds himself back from bewildering the readers with instances of so called 'local colour' – the nipa palms are about the only instance of any named local colour that we have been given so far, yet we are unmistakably in a foreign land, and the sun is going down over a silent, still, glittering road of a river that looked like a band of smooth shining metal bordered by looming forests. Excellent and subtle use of contrast may be found in bunches of leaves enormous and heavy hanging unstirring over the brown swirl of eddies. The delicate motion of eddies seems to be just what is required to tell us that *nothing* moved. The very next sentence punctuated by so many commas and the repetition of 'every' seems to make it very clear to us that the landscape was indeed as absolutely silent as the author says it was. Every bit of detail concerning how the paddles were driven makes the scene even more real and the final sentence of the paragraph prepares the readers for a journey into the unknown. The next paragraph emphasises the silence again. We are made to wonder by now why the silence is so important to the story.

We have seen the story being told from the point of view of the Malay where the White Man is simply the white man, and now there is another instance of both a realistic description as well as a shift in point of view. Though it involves both the characters at the same time, it concerns how they

see what happens, not how they know it is happening. The boat pivots around the paddle dug in strongly by the steersman, but Conrad gives us the exact vision that the inhabitants of the boat see: and suddenly the long straight reach seemed to pivot on its centre, the forests swung in a semicircle, and the slanting beams of sunset touched the broadside of the canoe with a fiery glow.

The narrow creek is described as a serpent-like creature that was moving inside the forest. It gives to the description of the scene an eerie feeling as if the white man was now going inside something that was unknown and threatening at the same time.

The description continues with the point of view of the white man who does not know the names of the tall trees, and we are led into a land of darkness and silence. The wide sweep of the stagnant lagoon is another fine example of using the point of view of the characters: the lagoon may be stagnant, but the sight of it after the narrow and dark creek seems to make it sweep itself out into a wideness hitherto missing.

The forests receded from the marshy bank as if unwillingly making way for humans encroaching on their natural dwelling place, or perhaps in an effort to stay away from one who was largely shunned by the polers because of his strange ways. The house or the dweller being known to the white man, the palm trees are once again identified to put the place in some kind of context. We are briefly introduced to Arsat through the thoughts of the polers, which, strangely enough, put both Arsat and the white man together on the same side even though Arsat has a name and is clearly less of an alien. Also, while the boatmen are calling out Arsat's name and there is no response, the white man silently climbs up the ladder to reach the house, implying an understanding that did not care for nationality or religion.

The exact motion of the boat is traced as it flows smoothly in, and softly knocks against the house. Now that the readers have been introduced into the landscape and the culture that the story encompasses, the author apparently sees no harm in introducing Malay equivalents to the story and he steersman is now called *juragon*.

Arsat does not greet the white man, but asks instead: 'Have you any medicine, Tuan?' This once again goes to show how close a bond the two people share; at least from Arsat's point of view, the white man is *Tuan*, a friend who need not be greeted formally. (We may however remember, *Tuan* is also used in Malay as a form of respectful address for a man, equivalent to 'sir' or 'mister'.) It is not probable that Arsat's private crisis made him talk like that: a man who exiles himself in a lagoon is not expected to ask anything of anyone without

at least first formally addressing him.

It is interesting that 'Has she been long ill?' is asked by the 'traveller', not 'the white man'. This is as close the white man can allow himself to come to Arsat: a traveller (for whom this is not home, much like Arsat himself) not necessarily a nameless alien. This is as close the author can come to show the white man express his concern. When he answers Arsat's question, however, he is referred to as the white man again, who speaks sorrowfully, but as a stranger to whom Arsat's loss is understood, not felt personally. He had grown to like Arsat 'not so much perhaps as a man likes his favourite dog' coupled with what we are told of the turbulent times when they had become friends tells us that the white man, because of his very whiteness, could not possibly think of Arsat as an equal. Yet, as a fellow warrior he has acquired 'a respect and bond in spite of himself'.

Before the sampan passed out of the lagoon into the creek he lifted his eyes. Arsat had not moved. He stood lonely in the searching sunshine; and he looked beyond the great light of a cloudless day into the darkness of a world of illusions.

This observation is not the narrator's; it is evidently the white man's way of seeing things. He does not really understand, but Arsat believes he does; or perhaps he knows his Tuan's limitations, and takes what he is offered since that is the best he has under the circumstances. The white man is shown looking at the wake of the boat yet again, just as we saw him at the beginning of the story: the only significant addition, shall we say, to the scene is that he is in fact facing Arsat because of his position.

Apparently, Arsat's action is ruled by his passion for the woman he loves. In which case, we should say that the flaw in his character is that he is ruled by passion and makes rash judgements. This line of reasoning is suspect, because if we speak of reason, then there is hardly anything rational in all three of them dying: There is also the white man's point of view to consider, one that sees Arsat looking into the darkness of a world of illusions. For the white man, not the traveller or Tuan, Arsat's desire to go back and make amends is irrational. The final line of the story clearly suggests that the white man believes that reality consists of the desire to move along rather than go back.

It might be useful at this point to look at use of points of view in the story: the white man is *Tuan* from Arsat's point of view. Arsat is a man to be disliked, even feared, from the Malay oarsmen's point of view. Arsat's story itself is told from Arsat's point of view and looked upon from the white man's perspective. While this would be the most natural thing to happen, we need to remember this because of the way the story ends. The narrative subtly blends in with the character's point of view, telling us that all action here is subjectively treated, nothing is definite: there is no judgement to be made. We are simply told a tale and its impact upon two very different people sharing a peculiar bond. Therefore,

Arsat's action or decision is not so important as the psyche of the man taking it. As far as he is concerned, there is no question of rationality: it is either a decision of honour, or it is not. He does something that is cowardly, from his own point of view, and this is all that should concern us. From his point of view, then, he is guilty, and must go back to make amends. He believes that his beloved has died because of his sins. He remembers his brother's words: "There is half a man in you now – the other half is in that woman."

Arsat had pushed the boat into deep water without waiting for his brother; he saved themselves; to have her he could have faced anyone, but now that he had her, she had become more important than honour. This is what Arsat knows and feels; this is his reality. This is not simply Arsat's story. It concerns any human being who has had a moment of weakness and time afterward to regret his action(s). As we read in *Ethics*:

An *akratic* person goes against reason as a result of some *pathos* ("emotion," "feeling"). Like the *akratic*, an *enkritic* person experiences a feeling that is contrary to reason; but unlike the *akratic*, he acts in accordance with reason. His defect consists solely in the fact that, more than most people, he experiences passions that conflict with his rational choice. The *akratic* person has not only this defect, but has the further flaw that he gives in to feeling rather than reason more often than the average person.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Arsat's actions that leave his brother to die may be called *akratic*, because, what he feels would have been appropriate – and therefore reasonable, in our parlance – was to have waited for his brother no matter what, or gone on to help him even if that meant dying with him and sacrificing his beloved. If we were to take the white man's point of view into account, then the world of illusions that Arsat is looking forward to is one that is flawed. But we are here talking about Arsat, and not the white man, whose sensibilities call such a move towards expiation illusory.

When the white man says 'We all love our brothers', there seems to be more than just a compassionate answer to Arsat's 'Tuan, I loved my brother.' Conrad puts in a deliberate pause in the narrative at this point. Is it possible that Conrad here has hinted at some element of the white man's past which had made him betray a brother? It seems that just another brief remark as in 'I fear so', might have made the narrative redundant. The white man is given space and action here because the author wants us to notice something. This point, incidentally, might have been noticed by Christine Simpson adapting the story as the play *Arsat* for the National Asian American Theatre Company and Fluid Motion Theatre & Film at Baruch Performing Arts Centre production as the following extract will demonstrate: "Adapter Christine Simpson, has

fleshed out this basically thin precursor to Conrad's richer and more fully characterised fiction by giving Tuan his own tale of regrets ... The Tuan add-ons ... don't really add substance".<sup>3</sup> The *Tuan add-ons*, as the reviewer puts it, do not add substance probably because this is not a story that is supposed to demonstrate camaraderie by sharing tales of regret; on the contrary, Conrad makes it a point to note that what is all important to Arsat is incomprehensible to the white man – who has presumably dealt with his own regrets. Perhaps Conrad has simply kept him in the story to put more emphasis on the fact that Arsat is utterly alone, with no one to understand him, and even the one who he thinks he does, is too far removed from his unique sensibilities.

The lagoon opens with a sweeping motion; that makes it a place where we may expect to find the plot showing some action. Arsat had chosen to reside on the lagoon as the lagoon provides him with the perfect retreat, and shields him from the world outside. The lagoon obviously stands as a metaphor when it is being used as a title, and it is quite irrelevant when and why it was chosen by Arsat. The concept of exile is dominant in the theme of the story, whether it is taken in a sense of physical separation from one's own land or psychological alienation from the rest of the world. Arsat, by his very nature, is cut off, isolated from everyone else around him. This is partly because of the person he is, and partly because his sense of guilt and shame has to be hidden. Karain<sup>4</sup> too, hides his guilt from the people he rules and only the old wizard knows the truth. There too, the white men serve as listeners to a tale of regret and horror. The setting in each case is away from western civilisation, but in case of the present story, the narrative describes a setting that borders on the primordial, and in keeping with that, we might do well to look for basic instincts of the human mind. The lagoon with its mysterious, hidden appearance serves as the perfect setting for Arsat's story. It is possible to see him as one of the few people who will always remain isolated and alienated simply because there were very few of them to begin with. It is also something of an irony that Arsat, who had originally tried to escape from land by sea seeks refuge in an isolated part of the sea itself. When he goes back – and he *is* decided – he will have completed a full circle. The lagoon signifies the interim when he is waiting to be a 'whole man' again.

The word *dimon* signifies one of the evil spirits of traditional Jewish and Christian beliefs. Arsat is probably a follower of Islam, but that is of no consequence: it is Conrad who is writing the story. He might have put in that particular name (*Diamelen*) to signify a possession of sorts that makes Arsat forsake honour and run away. Alternatively, *daimon* also stands for 'divinity' in

Greek, denoting purity of intent. The name *Diamelen* can have the latter significance too, in which case it would mean that she is the one whose presence in his life makes Arsat confront his own weaknesses. We can hope for purifying our souls only when we see ourselves clearly. It is always easy to be an idealist in theory.

The lagoon acts as a shell where, far away and exiled from the rest of the world, Arsat can look at himself and his life's decisions. It is a place as well as a state of being, as we have already noted. The relevance of silence is obvious: the lagoon is a place for contemplation, for coming to terms with one's regrets, but not in the way of the white man. It is a place as also a fragment in time where Arsat's life has stopped. To name the story 'Arsat' would reduce it to just one person's personal guilt, as Karain<sup>4</sup> is. Karain does not seek redemption or expiation. He wants to run away and hide. His guilt has made him a lesser man. Therefore his story is called by his name. Arsat, on the other hand, is not just one person. He stands for a psychological cleansing through which one may learn the truth about oneself and gather the courage to correct any mistake made in the past. The story, therefore, is not of Arsat: it is of anyone who fails for an instant and has the courage to suffer for such failing rather than hide it away from even one's own self. It is a story about a mind resembling a lagoon where it remains isolated, experiences the ebb and flow of the tides, remains still but not stagnant, and awaits the time when it shall be ready to end its exile honourably.

Earlier, we wondered why silence was so important to the story: now we know.

#### Notes

1 Biography by Petri Liukkonen; <[www.literaturepost.com](http://www.literaturepost.com)>

2 Kraut, Richard, "Aristotle's Ethics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2001 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed.

3 Reviewed by Elyse Sommer. October 7th, 2003 performance; <[www.curtainup.com/talesofunrest.html/](http://www.curtainup.com/talesofunrest.html/)>

4 Conrad, Joseph, *Karain: A Memory*, 1898

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