

**MASCULINITY, MASOCHISM, AND THE ROMANTIC HERO: LOCATING  
TRAUMA AND ITS EFFECTS ON GENDER PERFORMANCE(S) IN JOSEPH  
CONRAD'S *LORD JIM***

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**Abstract**

*Employing Cathy Caruth's theorisation of trauma and Leon Wurmser's conceptualisation about masochism – which is an essential amalgamation of trauma and shame – this paper wishes to locate as to how trauma affects the gender performance of the protagonist in the novel. It will attempt to show how Jim, as a result of trauma, fails to articulate his own experiences and the shame of which brings about his masochistic behaviour. This form of behaviour is far off from what is expected to be a stereotypical white masculine figure. However, it will be shown that the text recodes Jim's behaviour as masculine by justifying his behaviour as that of a 'romantic' hero.*

**Keywords:** masochism, masculinity, trauma, romantic hero, imperialism.

Although Jim is described by Marlow as a well-liked figure who was almost six-feet in height, was “powerfully built,” had a deep voice and whose “manner displayed a kind of dogged self-assertion which had nothing aggressive in it” – the epitome of Kipling's white imperial man<sup>1</sup> – he had a conspicuously unique characteristic which made him infamous throughout the sea ports along the Eastern side of the world: suddenly when a certain “fact” about him became known to anyone, he would leave his job (at which he was one of the best) and disappear from that sea port for once and for all. (Conrad 14) To understand and contextualise this peculiar action of an otherwise perfect Kiplingesque figure, it will prove to be beneficial to first look at Cathy Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma.

According to Caruth, trauma is an event the intelligibility of which escaped the victim at the moment of the actual witnessing, but which later resurfaces in the form psychologically intrusive phenomena such as hallucinations, dreams, et cetera. In her words, “what returns to haunt the individual ... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.” (6) The event, having escaped cognition, is not registered in a person’s understanding of time – it has happened out of time. The mind, which was not prepared for such quick stimulus, is overburdened by the quickness of the event, and tries to revisit that catastrophic event. This constant and repetitive return then becomes an attempt made by the individual’s unconscious to gain mastery over a fact which escaped comprehensibility in the first instance. The defining feature of trauma, for Caruth, then, lies in the absolute inexplicability of the violent event.

The ‘fact’ from which Jim runs is the ‘Patna’ incident. Patna was an old worn-out ship which was carrying eight hundred indigenous pilgrims on which Jim happened to be the chief mate. One night it ran over some debris in the Arabian sea and suffered considerable damage in the front portion. Jim went down to inspect the situation and horrifyingly discovered that the bulkhead was on the verge of breaking and letting the sea into the ship where the pilgrims were sleeping. There were not enough lifeboats on the ship, and it was apparently clear that alerting the pilgrims will result in unproductive chaos. Jim returned to the deck to witness the other three officers struggling over a lifeboat. Immediately labelling them as cowards, he refused to help them wishing to drown with the ship. He, then, perceived a strong gust of wind moving towards the ship which would have definitely burst the bulkhead and sunk the ship. During this time the other officers had managed to lower the lifeboat. The wind had its first impact on the ship, and it trembled slightly. Jim jumped on to the lifeboat without a thought, essentially abandoning the eight hundred native people to their fate. In fact, Marlow states that Jim did not even know that he had jumped. This act of jumping “into an everlasting deep hole,” then, proves to be the trauma that not only haunts Jim but also shapes his behaviour till the end of his life. (Conrad 86) The lifeboat drifts into the sea and the lights of Patna disappear which they mistake for the ship having sunk, whereas the reality was that the ship did not sink and was carried to port by a French gunboat. Jim is the only one who stands trial, for two officers drank themselves into a hospital while

one simply ran away. He feels that he deserves the death sentence for his actions and hence damns himself to death. However, only his license of being a naval officer is revoked.

It is important to remember that this incident is narrated entirely by Marlow and not a single word is spoken by Jim; and although all the facts are presented in excruciating detail, the jump is something that remains alien to the narrator and the narratee. Jim's silence on the matter can be grasped as his literal inability to comprehend the incident: he cannot articulate because he does not understand. Indeed, in the preface, Conrad states that Jim represses the experiences that he cannot yet grasp fully.

It is only Marlow who narrates and practices an authorial presence. In fact, Knowles and Moore have pointed out that his narration sews together parts of the narrative to make it comprehensible, and this process of sewing is a very deliberate one in which certain the positions from which the text "judges" Jim is carefully picked. (185) It then becomes clear that Marlow functions to be the narrator of the unnarratable, an event which proves to be so painful that it cannot be confronted consciously.

Any form of recollection/indication of the Patna incident is enough to send Jim running. Jim approaches Marlow for help in seeking a job, for he wishes to begin his life afresh. Marlow writes a recommendation letter for Jim to a good friend of his. At first, Marlow's friend writes positively about Jim to him in a letter, but then it is revealed in a latter letter that Jim has once again run away. He has also received a letter from Jim stating that he had encountered the second engineer from Patna in that rice mill who had got a temporary job there. He states that he left because he could not "stand the familiarity of the little beast." (Conrad 140) Here, what Jim despises and runs away from is not the second engineer himself but of the reminder of the incident. He could not 'stand' to recall that incident consciously. This incapability to recall the traumatic event is related, according to Martin, to shame. (231) Hence, Jim runs also because he is ashamed of the entire incident, or rather he is ashamed of the fact that he could not even grasp how and why it happened.

The Patna incident, then, also proves to be traumatic because Jim is a person who "attaches moral responsibility to fantastical projections." (Martin 235) This can be proven by his childhood fantasies of having adventures on the sea – captaining a ship, crushing mutinies, surviving on an island – after reading some adventure literature. It is the failure of

the connection between his spectacular fantasy and his inadequate action—a result of his trauma – which shames him. Jim’s trauma then immediately gives rise to shame. According to Wurmser, “the brutality of the trauma becomes [a] part of the inner world in the form of cruelty of conscience, of self-beratement and self-punishment, in the form of overwhelming shame.” (“Man” 142) Jim held himself responsible for the lives of the eight hundred pilgrims, which can serve to explain his absence of any defence at the trial: he wants to hurt himself for suffering becomes pleasurable. Suffering itself becomes a defence mechanism for the conscience. Wurmser calls this form of behaviour – in which an individual seeks to harm himself – “inner/moral masochism.” (“The Shame” 368) It is interesting to note that the narcissistic fantasy of being guilty about the incident and holding himself responsible for the lives of the people aboard the *Patna* is in itself a defensive delusion which serves to protect against the vulnerability of the trauma. In other words, Jim holds himself responsible, even though he is not, for he needs to believe that he had control over the situation, that had he done the right thing at the right time this catastrophic situation would not have arisen.

The catastrophe of the *Patna* incident is paralleled at Patusan where Jim encounters Gentleman Brown, an escaped convict who plans to plunder and loot the island. Martin, making a very insightful observation, writes that “in naming the ship the *Patna*, and the place of Jim’s death Patusan, Conrad emphasizes a parallelism that accentuates in the narrative Jim’s muteness when faced with the reality of trials.” (237)

Perhaps a brief summary of the events that took place in Patusan will be helpful here. Jim had moved to Patusan on some business a couple of years ago and had brought peace to the land by eliminating one of the competing rulers. He was hailed as a hero by the people and was almost worshipped. He served under the ruler Doramin alongside his son Dain Waris. While he was away for some work Brown had accidentally landed up there with his crew and seeing an opportunity decided to loot the place for supplies. However, the natives attacked and cornered them but did not kill them, for they wanted Jim to make that decision. When Jim returned and was told about the situation at hand, he went to talk with Brown instead of killing him straight away. Brown, guessing that Jim must have had a troubled past for who would come to live on such an isolated island, pressed him on the correct points; and

Jim, in his discomfort about his traumatic past and the similarities between them, hurriedly promised a safe passage back.

Similar to the Patna incident, Jim does not tell the others as to what kind of a person Brown actually is. Brown gains access to some insider information regarding routes and ambushes Dain Waris and his platoon, killing almost everyone. Jim's decision of not disclosing could again be linked to his narcissistic fantasy of being heroic and projecting his own insecurities of lacking the skills for decision on everyone else. According to Wurmser, the two selves consisting of a heroic fantasy and the other of an insecure, anxious image coexist together. (376) Hence, while his heroic self is a defence mechanism through which he protects his anxious self, his anxious and vulnerable self is projected on to others whom he believes to be worthless like him. Perhaps this explains his decision to not inform others. This time, however, Jim was, to a certain extent, responsible for the lives of the people. It will be easy to guess here that Jim, enmeshed in his masochism, blames himself and walks straight unto death at the hands of Waris' father Doramin. He could have run away or fought but he chooses to die because the only pleasure and power he knows is through suffering. Another form of suffering that he imposes upon himself when he damns himself to literal death is his deliberate separation from his wife Jewel. When Jewel asks Jim to fight and not give up, he states that there is nothing worth saving. Jim's masochism, a result of his trauma, is finally realised when he confronts Doramin and is killed.

Here, a pertinent question needs to be raised: Why is Jim, whose characteristics and actions are opposite to the ideal masculine figure— his personality is riddled with trauma and masochistic behaviour— seen as a heroic figure? Or more specifically, how does masculinity function in the text? To answer these questions, it will be beneficial to reexamine Marlow's role in the text as an authoritative voice. As was pointed out earlier, Marlow controls the narrative and most importantly attempts to influence the reader's perception of Jim. One of the most repeated phrases in the text interestingly is the pronouncement that Jim was "one of us." (41) This phrase is sparsely distributed throughout the novel at irregular intervals, appearing a total of ten times. However, the function of the phrase is always the same – to appeal to the reader that Jim belonged to the social group of men. The necessity of this anxious repetition lies in Jim's failure to adhere to the stereotypical masculine code. This

form of reading of masculinity is further complicated by Jameson's analysis of the novel. Hence, the analysis that follows first locates Jameson's argument regarding textual negotiations and then will focus on the masculinities that are present in the novel and will finally answer as to how is Jim's masculinity configured and romanticised throughout the novel.

According to Jameson, then, any given text needs to deal with the socio-political crises that surround its origins. The text romanticises the problematic aspects of the socio-political crises and presents it as a utopian project. This is done by placing the text on a "purely aesthetic level." (Jameson 202) This is especially visible in Conrad's negotiations with imperialism. McCracken employs Jameson's theorisation about textual negotiations and uses it to study gender relations. He states that "Conrad co-opts the aesthetic of new subjectivities to create a new masculine dominant out of what amounts to a crisis for the old masculinity." (29) Jim, then, with the obvious help of Marlow's deliberately selected perspectives, becomes a romantic hero.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to Marlow's oft-repeated phrase – "one of us" – it is important to remember that Marlow is narrating the story not to the reader of the novel directly but to other professional men. Marlow's appeal can then also be read as an appeal to 'men' to accept Jim's masculinity. However, another question needs to be posed here: why does Jim's masculinity need to be repeatedly reasserted in the first place? It will be remembered that during the Patna incident Jim does not aid the other sailors, for he loathes their cowardice, which is a result of his morality being situated in a domain of fantasy. Even in the lifeboat Jim denies any familiarity to them by stating that he was nothing like them. This action of his, however, immediately marks him out as an individual who is not a part of the professional men's group. Here also the narrative is rebalanced by Marlow, for when he is questioned by Jim as to what he would have done, he simply states that he was hesitant to answer because he did not want to admit that truth, and ends by remarking that "really, he was too much like one of us." (Conrad 83)

The encounter between the effects of trauma, masochism, and masculinity in the text reaches its peak at Jim's trial in the courthouse. One of the assessors, Brierly – the perfect man according to Marlow, for he could not find a single fault in him – symbolically becomes



a judge of Jim's imperial masculinity. At the very outset of the chapter it is made clear by Marlow that the enquiry was set up just for the sake of it. After all, a white male was on trial and symbolically along with him on the trial was the masculinity of the entire group of 'professional men.' Finding fault with Jim meant finding fault in the masculinity of the professional men. Brierly, a man who was cool under every situation, in his last conversation with Marlow angrily questions him as to why Jim is standing trial. He finally states what the actual matter is: "This infernal publicity is too shocking: there he sits while all these confounded natives ... are giving evidence that's enough to burn a man to ashes with shame." (Conrad 57) It will be guessed with relative ease that the reason Jim refuses to defend himself is his masochistic desire to suffer. When Marlow defends Jim's actions, Brierly quite ironically states that sea men do not know what they are supposed to be, that is, they do not know that they have to keep the façade of white imperial masculinity at all times. He even offers Marlow money to make Jim run away. However, Jim stands trial and is stripped off of his naval officer's license. Soon after the trial Brierly commits suicide. One of the most interesting aspects of masculinity in the text that is revealed in this analysis is that masculinity is always defined in difference to the Other(s); it is done by exclusion of marginal voices. Hence, the compulsive repetition that Jim is one of them also refers to his Whiteness apart from his gender. Even at the end of the novel instead of fighting – a masculine trait – Jim, at the expense of others' shock, chooses death. This death, however, is coded as an honourable choice,<sup>3</sup> and Marlow's plea still haunts the listener: "he is one of us." (296)

Hence, it could be safely concluded that the intersections of trauma and masculinity have been aptly located. This paper first defined and located as to how trauma affects the protagonist and how that trauma becomes a part of his personality in the form of masochism. Masochism, as was shown through Wurmser's theorisation, arises due to an amalgamation of trauma and shame. This masochism forces Jim to behave in ways which are not deemed to be traditionally masculine. It was then seen as how Conrad's text deliberately encodes this masculinity in a romance-like manner and Jim's unorthodox behaviour gets recoded as a form of masculinity itself. In fact, the novel recodes Jim's masculinity so well that even renowned critics have hailed him as a romantic hero.

## Notes

1. I employ the term imperial masculinity as is highlighted in the poems of Rudyard Kipling, especially in “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) and “If —” (1910). The characteristics of the white imperial male might include but are not limited to an undefeated attitude in the times of turmoil, courage in the face of catastrophe, unending energy, and a capacity to lead the savage Other into light.
2. Apart from Jim being referred to as a ‘romantic’ throughout the novel, his character, at least in the popular discourse, is that of a romantic hero. One might see the various character analyses of Jim on popular guide sites which label him as a romantic hero.
3. Watt (1980) and Watts (1993) have deemed Jim’s death as “honourable,” believing that he was in accordance with the naval code.

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