

Imperialism as Depicted in Tagore's *Red Oleanders* (*Raktakarabi*) And Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: A Contrast between East and West



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ABSTRACT: This article makes a comparative study between Tagore's *Red Oleanders* (*Raktakarabi*) and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* based on Eastern and Western perspectives. The writings of Conrad and Tagore have unveiled the untold cruel sides of imperialism, which hides its true intention under the mask of civilizing colonized people and its effect on the culture and society. However, there are significant differences in the presentation of imperialism in Conrad and Tagore's works. In *Heart of Darkness*, even though Conrad showcases the dark side of imperialism, he portrays native people as barbers who need colonizers to guide them. In contrast, Tagore symbolically portrays imperialism only as a burden for the natives. This paper presents how a Western writer's view on imperialism differs from an Eastern writer's perspective.

KEYWORDS: Colonialism, Culture, East, Imperialism, Orientalism, West

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore's *Red Oleanders* (*Raktakarabi*) (1925) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) explores the moral, psychological, and cultural consequences of imperialism in an interconnected yet contrasting way. *Red Oleanders* (*Raktakarabi*) symbolically presents the effect of British colonialism in India, while *Heart of Darkness* shows the same in the setting of Congo. Imperialists have been expanding their power from ancient times by conquering other nations. Modern-day imperialism started "around 1700 when modern, relatively developed nations were taking over less developed areas, colonizing them, or influencing them to expand their power" (Weebly n.p.). European imperialism was influential throughout the world at that time. They established colonies in many countries of Asia and Africa. The British colonized India for about two hundred years. British people came to India in the seventeenth century and established the British East India Company. British economic and technological power increased the popularity of the Company rapidly. The Company kept expanding and took hold of the whole country's power. They ruled and ransacked the country and imprisoned the natives both physically and spiritually. Even though the people were revolting against the British rule, they were still their slaves in mentality.

The play *Red Oleanders* relates to the time of colonial domination in India. Tagore believed it was more important for the people to be spiritually emancipated first. In his play *Red Oleanders*, Tagore derived the name Yaksha Town from a mythical underground city named Yakshaprui, where gold was hidden under the ground. There is also a goldmine in Yaksha Town, the primary source of obsession for the King and the rest of the citizens. In this play, Tagore gave a message for Indian people to realize their situation and break the shackles of mental slavery.

European imperialists first came to Africa in the late 19th century. Africa was then enriched with ivory, rubber, and other valuable minerals which were in high demand in Europe. These things attracted different European nations, who were desperate to get these assets by taking over some of the African land. In 1885, King Leopold II of Belgium took control of the Congo. During his reign, he treated Congo as his property and exploited it to the fullest extent possible without regard for the native people. The natives suffered greatly because of his greed and they lost their land and their freedom. They were being enslaved and forced to work for the European Company. While working there, Conrad discovered the dark truth behind the pretty mask of European colonization. That is why he left Congo before finishing his job. Many of his remarks in the novel *Heart of Darkness* are stated from his real-life experiences in Congo.

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Western imperialism is presented in both *Red Oleanders* and *Heart of Darkness*, but it is approached from different angles. *Heart of Darkness* relates the tale of imperialism in Congo, whereas *Red Oleanders* is about it in India. As one of the authors is from a colonized country and the other is from a colonized country, there are many distinctions between them, even though the themes in both cases are the same. Though *Heart of Darkness* explores many of the negative consequences of imperialism, Conrad, a Westerner, struggles to completely shed his prejudice that Africa is a mysterious place and its inhabitants are beneath him. His portrayals of imperialism convey that the people of Africa require assistance from the West. He may have a different perspective from the colonized people, who are the ones who suffer the most as a result of colonization. Hence, the researchers felt the urge to explore the depiction of imperialism from an Eastern and Western perspective in *Red Oleanders* and *Heart of Darkness* to understand the difference between East and West.

METHODOLOGY

As it is an imperial study, the researchers have followed content analysis method. The researchers' primary sources for research data are *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *Red Oleanders (Raktakarabi)* by Rabindranath Tagore, and *Orientalism* by Edward Said. As secondary sources, the researchers have gathered information from other relevant books, review papers, articles, literary publications, criticisms, journals, and websites related to this research topic. These materials help the researchers to examine how the theme of imperialism is addressed in the aforementioned books.

DISCUSSION

Red Oleanders and *Heart of Darkness* both delve into the dark and unsettling ideas of colonial domination. Though the writers are from different nations, they present the shocking truth behind colonial rule and its effect on both colonized and colonizers' culture, ethics, and psychology in their respective works. In contrast to *Heart of Darkness*, where the researchers solely hear from the colonizers, *Red Oleanders* focuses on the experiences of the colonized people.

Tagore's *Red Oleanders*

While Rabindranath Tagore produced his exceptional literary works, India was governed by the British. At that time, Indian people's lives were a mess due to the colonizers. The colonizers were not only treating the natives as their slaves, but they were also controlling the Indian economy fully and using it for their benefit. Indian people were serving like slaves, but their country was not benefiting from their labor. They yearned bitterly for independence from the imperialists. During that time, Tagore wrote a symbolic one-act play titled *Red Oleanders*. It is one of the poet's outstanding plays and is well-known and studied for its metaphorical depiction of various social issues. The idea of independence influenced Tagore's *Red Oleanders*. Tagore urges readers to free themselves from the mental servitude that resulted from British Imperialism. Dallakoti (2008) wrote, "Emancipation from the degeneration and material bondage is the main theme of the *Red Oleanders*. Tagore wants to emancipate humanity" (20).

Red Oleanders was initially written in Bengali under the name *Raktakarabi* in 1923. Later, Tagore translated it himself in 1925. The Indians are encouraged by this drama to struggle for their liberation from their captors. When Tagore saw a crimson oleander blossoming under a pile of iron scrap, he was inspired to compose this drama. The protagonist of this drama, Nandini, is comparable to that crimson oleander blossom. She is compared to "the light that breaks through a cracked wall" (Tagore 6), and in Yaksha Town, she stands for beauty, kindness, independence, and love. Everyone adores her for both her beauty and her independence.

In contrast to Nandini, the King of Yaksha Town is the one that everyone dreads. He hides behind a net from everyone, and his Governor oversees his administration along with others like the Headman and Deputy Governor. The primary treasure of Yaksha Town is blocks of gold from underground tunnels by the diggers. Like other Indian women, Nandini yearns to see her beloved Ranjan again because he shares her sense of spontaneity. The Governor is concerned that if Nandini and Ranjan band together, they would inspire the diggers to rebel. For this reason, he plots against Ranjan to prevent him from seeing Nandini. Eventually, without realizing who he is, the King murders Ranjan. When Nandini pushes the King to open the door because she is eager to see Ranjan, she discovers him dead. After the play, the King exits his dismal jail cell and follows Nandini down the path to complete freedom. This play presents "the sorry state of affairs of the numerous individuals of the country [India] living in that age and time under the clutches of colonization, whereby exploitation, force, control, and degeneration were the call of the day, especially for the poor and downtrodden" (Dkhar 44).

In Yaksha Town, the King holds ultimate power only in the constitution. In reality, the administration or the people manipulate the King for their own benefit, like the Governor, Headman, and Deputy Governor. In his essay "The Spirit of Freedom," Tagore (1920) wrote, "In the age of monarchy, the King lived surrounded by a miasma of intrigue. At court, there was an endless whispering of lies and calumny, and much plotting and planning among the conspiring courtiers to manipulate the King as the instrument of their purposes" (n.p.). It is the same about the King of Yaksha Town also. As in older age, the King's people "built for him a gorgeous prison of unreality" (n.p.), Yaksha Town's King's people also hide him behind a wall of netting which

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separates him from everyone and also imprison him. Rabindranath criticizes the Western imperialists by using the symbol of the King of Yaksha Town. The Western people think they hold the ultimate power over the colonized Indians and Indians are their slaves. Tagore criticizes them in "The Spirit of Freedom" writing,

They (the people of the East) are flattered into believing that they are free, and they have the sovereign power in their hands. But this power is robbed by hosts of self-seekers, and the horse is captured and stabled because of his gift of freedom over space. The mob-mind is allowed the enjoyment of an apparent liberty, while its true freedom is curtailed on every side. (n.p)

Tagore despised the idea of aggressive nationalism popular in the West. He supported nationalism that was peaceful and harmonious in contrast to imperialism in the West. Syeda Roushanara Yasmin wrote that Tagore "deprecated Western imperialism and the West's arrogant display of power" (n.p.). Imperialism also brought Capitalism and industrialism to India, dramatically altering the nation's economic landscape. In many of his works, Tagore tried to show how Capitalism hurts a nation's economy. People started working as workers instead of farmers as a result of industrialization. These events had a significant impact on the nation's economy as well as the general quality of life for the populace. The lower class people became ensnared in the web of Capitalism in search of a luxury lifestyle. Additionally, the bourgeois started to become significantly wealthier and yearned for more, the "West's tremendous success in science and technology had led to an increasing greed for power" (7). This circumstance is also made available in *Red Oleanders*. Even though gold blocks surround the King, he continues to want more. The people who served under King are also the same. They are selfish because of their extreme avarice. Even former farmers are now involved in the gold mining industry. They are unhappy with how things are now in Yaksha Town. Even so, they do not want to quit their jobs because the Governor will not permit it and because they are no longer motivated to do it. They are trapped inside a maze-like cage. When Chandra tells Bishu, "Let us fly from here" (Tagore, 1925, p. 41), Bishu replies, "Your Governor has closed the way as well as the will to return. If you go there today, you will fly back here to-morrow, like a caged bird to its cage, hankering for its drugged food"(43). Despite their hardships, their "dream of gold" (43) imprisons them in Yaksha Town. The Yaksha Town's diggers resemble the King's slaves. Tagore wanted to make people aware of "how slavery changes people, and his envision about Western Capitalistic ideas and approaches changes the people" (Ravindar & Thivagaran, 2015, p. 308). These laborers, who resemble enslaved people more than employees, are not even regarded as beings of the human race. They "are not men to them, but only numbers" (Tagore, 1925, p. 47). Not even their names are used to address them. They receive digits like "47 V" and "69 NG".

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

In *Heart of Darkness*, the trip of Charlie Marlow up the Congo River is the main subject. Through this journey, Marlow explores the depths of his awareness and confronts his inner self. He also learns about the corrupting effects of giving people authority without sufficient rules or regulations. However, Marlow never uses the name Congo in the book; instead, he refers to it as *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow discovers the sinister reality of imperialism on this expedition. This book begins in the Thames, where Marlow and his companions wait for the tide aboard the cruise Yawl Nellie while he shares his tale of his travels to Africa.

Marlow sets out on his voyage as soon as he has the chance to realize his dream of visiting Africa. He is hired to serve as the steamboat's captain after the steamboat's captain, Fresleven, was killed in a conflict with a native. Marlow sets off on his adventure in a French steamer and eventually arrives at the Company's first post on the coast of Africa. Here, he meets the Company's head accountant, who tells him about Kurtz, an ivory trader who purchases ivory from locals in the inner station. The researchers get a view from Ania Loomba's book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* about the nature of the colonizers' trading activities. She wrote,

In the West Indian plantations they produced sugar for consumption in Europe, and raw cotton was moved from India to be manufactured into cloth in England and then sold back to India whose own cloth production suffered as a result. In whichever direction human beings and materials travelled, the profits always flowed back into the so-called 'mother country'. (Loomba 9)

Though Loomba wrote this about India, the scenario was the same for Congo, too, which is stated indirectly in the novel.

Marlow reached the Central Station after eleven days. There, he finds that the riverboat sank, and it takes him about two months to fix the boat. While staying at the Central Station to mend the boat, he discovers more about Kurtz and grows increasingly eager to meet the mysterious figure. After fixing the boat, Marlow sets out towards the inner station with the general manager and crew members. After encountering several obstacles along the way, they arrive at the inner station and find Mr. Kurtz on the verge of passing away. The day after Kurtz passes away, Marlow is given specific paperwork to deliver to his Intended, a lady in Europe. Marlow does his assignment once he reaches England.

In his novella *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad explores the sinister reality of imperialism. Many researchers view *Heart of Darkness* as a portrayal of racism, which is typical in Western literature, even though the author condemns his people for unearthing hidden facts. This charge is supported by Conrad's portrayal of the African nation as a foreboding and enigmatic location and the African people as subordinate to Europeans. He writes about "the blank spaces on the earth," which are blank

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only on the map, but he forgets that "what on a map was a blank space was inhabited by natives" (Said 216). His portrayal of Africa reminds of Chinua Achebe's view that in Western psychology, that sets "Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (Achebe 15). Conrad tries to demonstrate how Africa is distinct and inferior to Europe from the start of the book. Rivers in the Congo and the Thames are shown very differently. As Marlow explains the beginning of his journey to the inner station through the river,

And on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, reverberating in hollow claps the ponderous beat of the stern-wheel....The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. (Conrad 36-37)

These lines suggest that the narrator thinks sailing on the Congo River is like traveling back in time, in contrast to the evident indications of civilization on the Thames, which has provided numerous services to the community around its bank. He says, "We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (37).

Conrad uses exaggeration not only when he explains the African landscape but also when he talks about African people. He skillfully uses words to make the reader feel that the Africans are inferior to the Europeans and that they need to be civilized with the help of the colonizers. In her article "Rhetoric of Imperialism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Sukanya Kashyap wrote about Conrad's use of language. She wrote that Conrad's language in *Heart of Darkness* shows:

...how the condition of imperialism causes the creation of a rhetoric of the imperialists that ingeniously portrays the natives –their "Other" as barbaric or non-human like in their existence....Language is manipulated by the colonizers to establish that the colonial hegemony over the natives is necessary for the latter. (Kashyap 1)

Conrad repeatedly uses words like savage, wild, dark, and cannibal to establish his belief that the native people are inferior. In Conrad's view, the native people do not know time, and their expressions differ from those of white men. Marlow, while talking about a native fireman, says, "...the savage who was fireman...was an improved specimen" (Conrad 38), as if he was not a human being but rather some kind of instrument. Moreover, that fireman was valuable only because "he had been instructed"(39) by some Europeans.

If the native people are not helpful to the Europeans, it does not mean that they are savage because they also live in a society, and their society functions in their way, and they are functional there. However, the native people are like some kind of inhuman entity to Marlow. It is difficult for him to accept that these native people are of the same species as him. He says, "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity –like yours –the thought of your kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (38).

The British Company came to Africa in the name of trade, but they gradually subjugated the local population and turned them into enslaved people, "Their settlement of colonies not just fueled up the evil features of racism, slavery, and corruption, but it also represented the brutality or revulsion of distorted power"(Muarif 1). They claimed that their mission is to civilize the aboriginal population. However, they did not act as politely as they professed to. They worked in an unethical and disorganized manner. Anything was possible for the colonists to do for their gain. For instance, the General Manager is envious of Kurtz because he believes Kurtz could one day replace him in his position. They pose as traders with the natives but steal their belongings instead. As Conrad writes, "It was robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness"(Conrad 10). At that time, ivory was a valuable resource in Africa. Although the imperialists say they trade ivory with the tribes, in actuality, they take it away from them. It is evident from the manager's speech when he talks about Kurtz, famous to the Company as an ivory collector, "snapping ivory from the natives" (49). Conrad tries to portray Africa as one where certain people develop unethical behavior. However, he never claims that those people developed a cruel mentality that led to their immoral behavior and that they were polished in Europe because they did not have the chance to unleash their inner demons there.

Comparative Study between *Red Oleanders* and *Heart of Darkness*

Red Oleanders and *Heart of Darkness* both touch on the subject of Western imperialism. However, they do so from various angles because Conrad and Tagore are from different societies, and their ideologies developed differently. According to the Oxford Dictionary, ideology is a "set of beliefs, especially one held by a particular group that influences how people behave." The term ideology was first coined by a French philosopher, Antoine Destutt de Tracy. Tracy pointed out that "Ideology understands ideas to issue, not haphazardly from mind or consciousness, but as the result of forces in the material environment that shape what people think." Louis Althusser wrote "ideology never says, I am ideological" (Althusser 700). People believe that they are outside of ideology, but ideology has a material existence in every culture that shapes the behavior of the people of that culture. Similarly, Conrad and Tagore have ideologies that influence how they view imperialism because they come from two different cultural backgrounds.

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Edward Said outlined and analyzed many perspectives that Westerners have on other nations. Said writes about the East, yet it is comparable to other nations where the West established colonies. Edward Said addresses the hegemonic Western representation of the East in his book *Orientalism*. He defines 'Orientalism' as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). The West employed discourse to create the Orient. The West created Orientalism from a political, sociological, ideological, and creative standpoint. Said stated that "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' " (2). Westerners presented all non-Europeans in their literature as a counterbalance to them, giving them the impression that they were superior to other cultures. European people have a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans," and they identify themselves as "...superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and culture" (7). Said uses Flaubert's portrayal of Kuchuk Hanem as an example. He opined that Flaubert was "foreign, comparatively wealthy, and male" that were considered "as the historical facts of domination," which allowed Flaubert "not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her" (6). There are numerous instances of this occurrence. It is an important aspect of Western imperialism. This is also true in *Heart of Darkness*, where a Western character speaks for the native people, yet the readers never hear them. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can also be examined in the context of Said's Orientalism theory. Even though this novella is about colonizing Africa, European perceptions of Africa and the Orient are relatively similar.

Heart of Darkness exposes several frightening facts regarding imperialism that Westerners are typically dubious about. Conrad depicts imperialism at its most extreme, yet as was already mentioned, Westerners view themselves as superior to other cultures. Conrad was similarly limited in his ability to transcend the usual Western perspective. Tagore, on the other hand, is a Bengali author whose nation was conquered by Europeans. Thus, their points of view would not always coincide.

Western civilization was technologically advanced, yet it lacked spiritual tranquility. Their frantic pursuit of material prosperity has caused much instability in their culture. Western civilization "has rubbed and sucked out the human self and spirit. Whereas the Eastern culture still preserves the serenity and truthfulness of soul that realizes the human self" (Dallakoti 21). However, Western imperialism had an impact on how Eastern culture was practiced. *Heart of Darkness* and *Red Oleanders* both depict the horrible torture of enslaved people. The conquerors in *Heart of Darkness* abuse the native people horribly. The conquerors force them to labor and do not provide adequate care or nourishment. Marlow says about the workers, "They were dying slowly...they were nothing earthly now –nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom" (Conrad 24). The King's gold mine in *Red Oleanders* also makes the laborers work as if serving the King is their only goal in life. As we can deduce from Nandini and the Governor's dialogue following Nandi's initial contact with the laborers in front of the King's palace:

Nandini: Look over there –what a piteous sight! Who are those people, going along with the guards, filing out from the back door of the King's apartments?

Governor: We call them the King's leavings....

Nandini: But are these men? Have they flesh and marrow, life and soul? ...who has brought them to this miserable plight?... Who is that? Indeed, it is Kanku...Even a boy like him has been chewed dry and thrown away a piece of sugar cane. (Tagore 107-110)

Though the both texts depict the inhumane treatment of the workers, *Heart of Darkness* portrays natives as inferior beings without knowledge of the outside world, cannibals, and filthy animal-like beings who eat inedible foods like rotten hippo meat and are unaware of the mistreatment they endure. While in *Red Oleanders*, the residents of Yaksha Town are intelligent and cultured, aware of the wrongdoings of the King and his subjects, and hopeful for their independence.

Conrad portrays the people of Congo as devoid of all human emotions. They are not even explicitly addressed or given names. They are solely called 'Negro,' 'savage,' 'nigger,' and similar terms. The loss of human individuality is also portrayed in *Red Oleanders*, where employees are given numbers instead of names. However, Tagore shows that they also have a private existence that is independent of their slave-like selves and in which they can express their own identities. They go by names like Phagulal, Bishu, or Kishor.

Both books share the same topic of greed. The personalities of Kurtz and the King are comparable. They are both incredibly materialistic people. One of the primary drivers of imperialism is the desire for material possessions. The King surrounds himself with netting that isolates him from the populace and makes him enigmatic, and Kurtz is enigmatic to everyone since no one can comprehend him. By conspiring against them, their people are exposing the flaws in the system. However, Tagore forces the King to escape his net and join the populace in their protest, foretelling the start of the reformation of the social structure. While Kurtz, in Conrad's novel, Kurtz realizes 'the horror' of the system, but he is powerless to oppose it and instead meets his end.

Tagore captures the call for freedom in *Red Oleanders*. The people of Yaksha Town know they are being mistreated and wish they could someday get retribution. It is evident when the Wrestler declares, "If only once I could somehow, –O good God, but once, – everything is possible to Thy mercy, –if only I could fasten my teeth for once in the Governor's throat!" (Tagore 119) after the

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King has tortured him. However, the natives are ignorant in Conrad's story. When a native is beaten, he screeches horribly, waits a few days to heal, and eventually passes away.

In Conrad's opinion, the people of Congo submit to European rule because they believe the Europeans are superior beings. They peacefully work under their command and endure all their tortures. They even agree with Kurtz's desire to become a deity among the people. On the other hand, the characters created by Tagore hate the King and his subjects. They labor for them because they cannot do anything else. But they do not honestly acknowledge their dominance and long for freedom. Conrad, a European, believes in their superiority and feels they are succeeding by colonizing other nations, but the colonial people, like Tagore, want them to be free.

CONCLUSION

Since the oppressor and the oppressed cannot share the same perspective on the reality of oppression, the perspectives of the colonized and the colonizer cannot be the same. They will both make an effort to defend their positions. The depiction of imperialism in *Heart of Darkness* and *Red Oleanders* is quite different to some extent. Even though *Heart of Darkness* depicts the dark side of imperialism, it presents the native people in a dark light, too. The native people are presented as savages who cannot rule themselves, so they need the help of the imperialists to develop themselves. However, *Red Oleanders* depicts imperialism solely as a problem for the native people. The natives are presented here as civilized and intellectual humans who are losing their cultural values because of the interference of foreign rules. In *Heart of Darkness*, only the voice of the imperialists is heard and known. However, in *Red Oleanders*, the natives' voices and their views on imperialism are heard. Conrad is from a country of the colonizers, while Tagore is from a colonized country. As Conrad and Tagore are from different societies, their ideologies developed differently. Conrad's ideology makes him believe that Europeans are superior to the others. *Heart of Darkness* makes it clear that despite Conrad's awareness of the wrongs committed by the Europeans against people in other nations in the name of imperialism; he still somehow thinks the situation is advantageous to the latter. On the other hand, Tagore's ideology makes him believe that his people can do better without foreign rulers' interference because he knows his people's sufferings and their crave for freedom. In *Red Oleanders (Raktakarabi)*, he demonstrates that his fellow citizens do not wish to be bound by foreign law. He wishes for his people to become free. Imperialism is portrayed differently in *Heart of Darkness* and *Red Oleanders*. *Heart of Darkness* depicts imperialism in such a way as if the colonized people require the imperialists' control to live better lives since they are inferior to them. In contrast, *Red Oleanders* depicts imperialism only as a source of suffering for the native people.

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