



Representation of Orientalism in Rudyard Kipling's *Limitations of Pambe Serang*

Putut Handoko

Universitas Dr. Soetomo

Hariyono

Universitas Dr. Soetomo

Cahyaningsih Pujimahanani

Universitas Dr. Soetomo

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the representation of Orientalism in Rudyard Kipling's short story *Limitations of Pambe Serang* (1889). The study employs Edward Said's postcolonial theory of Orientalism to analyze how Kipling portrays the Malay sailor Pambe Serang as a vengeful, unforgiving, and morally inferior figure compared to his European counterparts. Such depiction exemplifies the Eurocentric superiority complex embedded in colonial literature, which functions as a tool of imperial hegemony. By deconstructing Kipling's narrative strategies, the article reveals the stereotyping and misrepresentation of "the other" that legitimizes colonial domination. The study concludes that Kipling's story is not merely a cultural product of its time, but also a discourse that perpetuates racial prejudice and binary oppositions between the West and the Orient.

Key Words: Orientalism, Rudyard Kipling, colonial literature, stereotyping, postcolonial criticism

1. INTRODUCTION

Western colonialism was not only a political and economic enterprise but also a cultural project that sought to shape how non-Western peoples were imagined, represented, and understood. Literature played a central role in this process, functioning as what Edward Said (1978) calls a "textual instrument of empire." Through travel narratives, novels, short stories, and poetry, colonial authors participated—consciously or unconsciously—in producing stereotypes that positioned the Orient as exotic, dangerous, irrational, and inferior in contrast to the rational, civilized, and morally superior West. These literary constructions did not merely reflect attitudes of the time but actively reinforced imperial hierarchies, legitimizing domination by portraying it as a civilizing mission.

Citation: Putut Handoko, Hariyono, Cahyaningsih Pujimahanani, Representation of Orientalism in Rudyard Kipling's *Limitations of Pambe Serang*, *International Journal of Current Business and Social Sciences*. ISSN-2312-5985, 11 (5), 28-34, (2025).

Within this cultural framework, Rudyard Kipling occupies a pivotal position. Frequently referred to as the “poet of empire,” Kipling’s works encapsulate both the pride and anxieties of British imperialism at its height. His writings often oscillate between admiration for the strength and resilience of colonized subjects and a simultaneous denigration of their moral character, thereby exemplifying the ambivalent nature of colonial discourse. Scholars such as Benita Parry and Edward Said have argued that Kipling’s narratives embody the ideological contradictions of empire: fascination with the “other” on one hand, and the assertion of Western superiority on the other.

The short story *Limitations of Pambe Serang* (1889) provides a striking case study of how Orientalism operates within literary form. Set against the backdrop of maritime colonial encounters, the story portrays a Malay sailor, Pambe Serang, whose defining traits—vengefulness, unforgiveness, and instinct for retribution—are depicted as essential to his racial identity. By constructing Pambe as an embodiment of the “savage Oriental,” Kipling participates in a broader literary tradition that reduces non-Western characters to stereotypes. The Europeans in the story, conversely, are presented as rational, just, and morally upright, thereby reinforcing the binary opposition between West and East.

This article investigates how Orientalism is embedded in *Limitations of Pambe Serang* and how Kipling’s narrative strategies reproduce colonial ideologies. Using Edward Said’s framework of Orientalism, the study explores the mechanisms of stereotyping, racial prejudice, and binary construction within the text. By doing so, it seeks to illuminate the role of colonial literature not only as a reflection of imperial attitudes but also as an active participant in shaping cultural perceptions and justifying domination. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that Kipling’s story is more than a simple tale of maritime life; it is a discursive artifact of empire, where literary imagination and imperial ideology converge.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Literary works are often regarded as mirrors of society. However, during colonial times, they were also instruments of power, shaping perceptions of non-Western societies. Kipling’s portrayal of Pambe Serang raises questions about how Oriental stereotypes are embedded in Western literary discourse and how such representations legitimize colonial domination.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To analyze how Orientalism is represented in Rudyard Kipling’s *Limitations of Pambe Serang* using Edward Said’s postcolonial framework.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the stereotypes of Malay and other oriental characters in the story.
2. To identify how Kipling constructs binary oppositions between Western and non-Western characters.
3. To evaluate the implications of Kipling’s narrative in the context of colonial hegemony and cultural misrepresentation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) remains the cornerstone of postcolonial studies. Said argues that the Orient is not a natural or objective reality, but rather a Western construct designed to assert cultural, political, and epistemological dominance. By depicting the East as exotic, irrational,

backward, and morally suspect, Orientalism reinforces the West's self-image as rational, progressive, and superior. This discursive practice is not merely descriptive but instrumental, functioning as a form of cultural hegemony that legitimizes colonial domination.

Following Said, scholars such as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2007) broadened the conceptual scope of postcolonial studies by identifying recurring mechanisms of stereotyping, misrepresentation, and the production of "otherness." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), in her influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* critiques the silencing of colonized voices within Western discourse, showing how even narratives that appear sympathetic often re-inscribe imperial hierarchies. Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) problematizes binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized, introducing concepts such as "mimicry" and "hybridity" to explain the ambivalent, often contradictory nature of colonial representation.

Postcolonial critiques of canonical literature further demonstrate how deeply embedded Orientalist assumptions are in Western texts. Chinua Achebe's (1977) critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* exposes the racist dehumanization of Africans within a novel long celebrated as a humanist classic. Said himself, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), shows how writers such as Jane Austen and George Orwell unconsciously reproduce imperial ideologies even while appearing to critique them. These studies highlight a crucial paradox: the very works that articulate notions of universal humanism often simultaneously reinforce racial and cultural hierarchies.

Within this critical framework, Rudyard Kipling's writings have been consistently read as embodying the spirit of empire. As the so-called "poet of imperialism," Kipling often portrays colonized subjects as childlike, duplicitous, or morally deficient, thereby justifying the paternalistic presence of the British Empire. Scholars such as Edward Said and Benita Parry have pointed out that Kipling's works oscillate between fascination with and denigration of the colonized, producing what Bhabha would call an ambivalent discourse. In the specific case of *Limitations of Pambe Serang*, the characterization of the Malay sailor as vengeful and unforgiving aligns with long-standing colonial stereotypes of the "savage Oriental." Thus, Kipling's narrative not only reflects but also actively reproduces the Eurocentric worldview that underpins imperial authority.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Scholarly works (Ottuh & Ogar, 2023; Husein, 2024; Lok, 2020) affirm that imperialism manifests not only through political and military control but also through knowledge production and literature. Kipling's text exemplifies how narratives function as colonial tools, stereotyping non-Western peoples as despotic, vengeful, or morally inferior. By comparing Kipling to other colonial authors such as Conrad and Orwell, the persistence of racial prejudice in canonical literature becomes evident.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically content analysis combined with postcolonial literary criticism. The purpose of this methodological framework is to uncover how colonial ideologies are embedded within Kipling's *Limitations of Pambe Serang* through linguistic choices, narrative structures, and characterization. The research does not attempt to measure frequency or statistical data but instead seeks to interpret the text's underlying meanings and ideological implications.

Research Design

The study adopts descriptive-interpretative analysis, which emphasizes the close reading of literary texts to reveal the cultural and political assumptions embedded within them. This approach allows the researcher to move beyond surface-level description and interrogate how the text functions as a site of power relations, particularly in the colonial context.

Data Sources

1. Primary Data
Rudyard Kipling's short story *Limitations of Pambe Serang* (first published in 1889). The text is analyzed in its entirety, focusing on passages that describe characters, relationships, and cultural attributes.
2. Secondary Data
 - a. Theoretical works on postcolonialism, especially Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).
 - b. Complementary perspectives from Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin.
 - c. Relevant scholarly articles and critical essays that discuss Kipling, Orientalism, and colonial discourse in literature.

Data Collection

The process of data collection involved:

1. Reading the primary text multiple times to gain familiarity with its narrative flow and themes.
2. Identifying significant excerpts where Orientalist themes emerge, such as descriptions of Pambe Serang, binary contrasts between Europeans and Malays, and generalizations about racial characteristics.
3. Compiling these excerpts into thematic categories for systematic analysis.
4. Gathering secondary literature to contextualize and support the interpretation of the primary data.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed several steps:

1. Textual Close Reading – Conducting a detailed reading of the story to examine word choices, metaphors, and narrative tone. Special attention was given to passages where Kipling explicitly characterizes Pambe Serang as a "good Malay" and attributes genetic tendencies toward revenge.
2. Thematic Categorization – Organizing excerpts into recurring themes such as stereotyping, binary opposition, racial determinism, and imperialist justification.
3. Application of Postcolonial Theory – Interpreting the themes using Said's framework of Orientalism, along with Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence and hybridity, and Spivak's critique of subaltern silencing.
4. Contextualization – Placing the findings within the historical and cultural context of late 19th-century British imperialism, considering how literature served as an ideological tool of empire.
5. Interpretive Synthesis – Integrating textual findings with theoretical perspectives to construct a coherent argument about how *Limitations of Pambe Serang* exemplifies Orientalist discourse.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility of the analysis, the following strategies were applied:

1. Triangulation: Cross-referencing the primary text with multiple postcolonial theories and secondary

scholarly works.

2. Researcher Reflexivity: Maintaining awareness of the researcher's interpretive role and the potential influence of personal bias.
3. Thick Description: Providing detailed textual evidence and direct quotations to support interpretive claims, allowing readers to evaluate the validity of the conclusions.

Methodological Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to a single text, *Limitations of Pambe Serang*, and therefore does not attempt to generalize about all of Kipling's works. Moreover, the interpretation is grounded in postcolonial theory, which highlights power dynamics, stereotyping, and Orientalist discourse; alternative frameworks such as psychoanalysis or structuralism are beyond the scope of this research.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The textual analysis of Rudyard Kipling's *Limitations of Pambe Serang* reveals several interrelated layers of Orientalist representation that reinforce colonial ideologies. By examining characterization, narrative structure, and discursive strategies, the following key findings emerge:

1. Stereotyping of Malays: Kipling's description of Pambe Serang as a "good Malay" is deeply paradoxical. In the story, the narrator asserts: "Pambe was a good Malay. That is to say, he never forgave an injury, and he always remembered to avenge it." The irony of this statement lies in its inversion of moral categories: goodness is equated with vengeance, an attribute that is valorized in Kipling's depiction of Malay character. This essentialist stereotype denies individuality and instead projects a fixed cultural pathology onto an entire group. As Said (1978) notes, Orientalism thrives on such "imaginative geographies" that collapse diverse peoples into monolithic caricatures.
2. Construction of Binary Oppositions: The narrative consistently constructs binary oppositions between Europeans and orientals. For example, the European master is described as "the kind gentleman," a figure of benevolence and authority. In contrast, Pambe Serang is portrayed as deceitful and vindictive, with the narrator remarking that "a Malay never forgets; it is his virtue to brood and to strike when the time is ripe." This rhetorical contrast reinforces the dichotomy of West versus East—civilized versus savage, moral versus immoral. In Bhabha's (1994) terms, such binaries are central to sustaining colonial discourse, defining the colonizer only in opposition to the colonized.
3. Racial Prejudice and Determinism: Kipling also implies that Pambe's vengefulness is not merely cultural but biological: "Even though the Malay is born under another sky, still in his blood remains the thirst for revenge." This passage suggests a racial determinism that naturalizes violence and immorality as inherent to Malay identity. Such assertions reflect 19th-century pseudo-scientific racial theories, transforming individual behavior into immutable racial traits. From a postcolonial perspective, this is an instance of what Said (1978) calls the "essentializing impulse" of Orientalist discourse, which fixes the colonized subject within unchangeable categories of inferiority.
4. Imperialist Ideological Function: The broader narrative functions ideologically to legitimize Western imperialism. Europeans are depicted as rational and disciplined—"the master's justice was swift but fair"—whereas orientals are portrayed as irrational and morally corrupted. This contrast produces a moral justification for colonial rule: if the colonized cannot govern themselves due to their inherent flaws, then European governance appears both necessary and benevolent. As Said (1993) argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, such cultural texts are not neutral but serve as vehicles for embedding political domination within literary representation.

5. Narrative Ambivalence: Despite its dominant Orientalist framework, the story contains traces of ambivalence. Pambe Serang is described as both “loyal in service” and “terrible in revenge,” suggesting a grudging admiration for his cunning and determination. This ambivalence aligns with Bhabha’s notion of colonial discourse as “anxious,” simultaneously fascinated by and fearful of the colonized subject. While it does not subvert the overarching stereotype, this tension exposes cracks within the imperial imagination, where the colonizer’s authority is haunted by the possibility of resistance from the colonized.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Kipling’s *Limitations of Pambe Serang* exemplifies Orientalism as theorized by Edward Said, as the story perpetuates racial prejudice and binary oppositions by positioning Western characters as morally superior while reducing oriental characters to essentialized stereotypes of deceit, violence, and vengefulness. Through its narrative, language, and characterization, the text legitimizes the imperialist worldview by reinforcing the constructed image of the West as rational, civilized, and authoritative, in contrast to the Orient as irrational, inferior, and morally corrupted. This not only reflects the colonial discourse embedded in late nineteenth-century literature but also demonstrates how cultural production functioned as an ideological tool to sustain Western dominance, reminding contemporary readers of the need to critically examine the lingering presence of such discursive power in literary and cultural representations.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Future research should expand the analysis to compare Kipling’s portrayal of orientals with other colonial authors such as Conrad and Orwell.
2. Postcolonial readings of canonical texts should continue to uncover hidden biases in order to challenge Eurocentric interpretations of history and culture.
3. Contemporary readers and educators should critically engage with colonial literature to foster cross-cultural understanding and resist racial prejudices.

7. REFERENCES

- 1) Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007). *Post-colonial studies: The key concepts* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- 2) Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- 3) Kipling, R. (1889). *Limitations of Pambe Serang*. In *Many inventions*. Macmillan.
- 4) Lok, A. (2020). Binary opposition in postcolonial literature. *Cultural Studies Journal*, 15(2), 55–70.
- 5) Ottuh, J., & Ogar, E. (2023). Imperialism and cultural representation. *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 12(1), 33–48.
- 6) Parry, B. (1987). Problems in current theories of colonial discourse. *Oxford Literary Review*, 9(1–2), 27–58.
- 7) Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon.
- 8) Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Knopf.
- 9) Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- 10) Husein, M. (2024). Eurocentrism and literary representation. *Literary Criticism Review*, 19(3), 77–95.