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**INVESTIGATING THE NATURE OF GAZE IN AGNES KEITH'S
*LAND BELOW THE WIND***

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Abstract

Agnes Keith's *Land Below the Wind* (1939) is an autobiographical semi-fictional novel written based on her life in Sandakan, North Borneo. It provides a detailed account of her joyful—but at times challenging—life with her husband and their cheerful local servants. Keith's narrative is generally light-hearted and comical in nature adorned with cutting sarcasm hither and thither. Moreover, it also presents her open-mindedness as well as her affection for the land where they lived and the people there. Nevertheless, her unique position as the American wife of a British colonial officer renders her writing ambivalent nature: colonial and un-colonial. While her empirical observation of the local people offers the readers her deep affection towards them, that very gaze, is simultaneously, in numerous occasions, highly orientalist. The present study investigates the unique nature of the gaze of Agnes Keith in her *Land Below the Wind* predominantly focusing on her descriptions of her servants and other local people.

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Keywords: *Land Below the Wind*, Agnes Keith, Colonial gaze, orientalism, identity.



1. Introduction

Agnes Keith's *Land Below the Wind* (1939) is an autobiographical semi-fictional novel written based on her life in Sandakan, North Borneo. It provides a detailed account of her joyful—but at times challenging—life with her husband and their cheerful local servants. Keith's narrative is generally light-hearted and comical in nature adorned with cutting sarcasm hither and thither. Moreover, it also presents her open-mindedness as well as her affection for the land where they lived and the people there. Nevertheless, her unique position as the American wife of a British colonial officer renders her writing ambivalent nature: colonial and, as Hull and Pakri (2015b) termed, “un-colonial” (p. 105).

Having once been a journalist, Agnes Keith's narrative is well supported by her first-hand experience, and that it appears to be quite “factual”. Indeed, as Nimura (2016) pointed out, her work was once utilised even as a reference book by the Japanese army. The Japanese soldiers who were to be sent to Borneo actually learned about the place from her work. However, it does not necessarily mean that her writing consists only of indubitable pure facts. Rather, it unavoidably contains conventional orientalist representations of the “Orientals” and “natives” as well as the aforementioned affection towards them. When she observed, documented and reproduced the spectacle in front of her turning her gaze upon them, the act of seeing was no longer an innocent private observation. It was rather a highly politicised chaotic battleground where her identity was destabilised, reconciled and negotiated. Her gaze, therefore, possesses interestingly ambivalent nature, and that it deserves much attention.

This study therefore will focus on Agnes Keith's representation of the local people in her autobiographical semi-fictional novel *Land Below the Wind* and will investigate the complex nature of her gaze referring to the concepts of gaze suggested by Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre.

2. Problem Statement

Until recent years, Agnes Keith, despite her local fame and importance in the tourism industry in Sandakan, Sabah, has regrettably been an obscure author in the field of literary studies. Among the early contributions, Pakri and Openg (2014) conducted a stylistic analysis on a particular chapter in *Land Below the Wind* and, though the work is mostly taken as non-fictional, pointed out the fictional nature of it. Hull and Pakri (2015b) carefully analysed the work and identified the ambivalent nature of the work paying close attention to her unique background: an American wife of a British colonial officer.

The previous studies introduced above both highlighted the hybrid and ambivalent nature of the work, and especially the latter well demonstrated that Agnes Keith's account has a highly ambivalent nature; colonial and un-colonial, but less attention has been paid to the nature of her gaze—the act of seeing itself—with which she understood, and also represented the servants and the indigenous people. Nevertheless, it can be said that her act of seeing is, considering her equivocal standpoint—an American wife of a British colonial officer—, an important component of her work, and thus needs to be investigated.

3. Research Questions

As mentioned earlier, this study attempted to investigate the complex nature of Agnes Keith's gaze in her debut novel *Land Below the Wind*. In order to achieve it, we set the following three research questions:

1. In the mentioned work, how did she depict the local people through her gaze?
2. What was feature of her description of the local people?
3. How does her gaze function in *Land Below the Wind*?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of present study was to investigate the complex nature of Agnes Keith's gaze in her debut novel *Land Below the Wind* by referring to the concepts of gaze suggested by Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre. By doing so, it intends to identify the ideological function of the author's act of seeing.

As the research into Agnes Keith and her works is relatively a new trend, the present study shall contribute to the literature in that it adds a new approach to the text.

5. Research Methods

In this study, we have conducted a close reading on Agnes Keith's semi-autobiographical novel *Land Below the Wind* (1939) in order to analyse the nature of her gaze. In the course of the analysis, Keith's descriptions of her servants and the indigenous people of Borneo were carefully investigated. In order to identify the nature of the gaze, we have consulted the concepts of gaze suggested by Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Foucault highlighted that the interplay of two gazes blurs the boundaries between the spectator and spectacle, or subject and object (Reinhardt, 2018, para 4). Analysing the painting of Diego Velázquez in "Les Meninas", Foucault postulated that when the spectator is confronted by the gaze of the painter in the picture, "the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange", and it is there that the "subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity" (Foucault, 1994, pp. 4-5).

For Sartre, the gaze of the Other is what makes one become aware of one's subjecthood (Reinhardt, 2018, para 6), contradictorily though, in the negation of the subjectivity of the subject. Sartre suggested that: If in general there is an Other, it is necessary above all that I be the one who is not the Other, and it is in this very negation effected by me upon myself that I make myself be and that the Other arises as the Other (Sartre, 1969, p. 283). Although both concepts came from different fields of study, what the two scholars suggested in the respective field—art criticism and ontology—are effectively generalisable and applicable to literary studies. Thus, this study examines Agnes Keith's representation of her servants and the indigenous people in Borneo utilising the concepts of gaze mentioned above.

6. Findings

As Roya and Mittapalli mentioned in the Introduction of *The Male Empire Under the Female Gaze* (2013), the British empire in India—the British Raj in India and the entire colonial ideology—was

masculine in nature (Introduction, *Empire: Male or Masculine?*, para. 1). Although, the British empire was by no means a consistent entity, and thus, a different part of the empire should be examined carefully considering the characteristics of the region and the colonial politics implemented there, at least this masculine nature of the empire appears to have been also dominant in the case of British North Borneo. As one can see it from Keith's comments on "the Empire Builders of to-day", they were "men" (Keith, 2010, p. 17). Apart from the hardships experienced by the *Memsahibs* in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British Raj, Agnes Keith's situation was arguably far more complex as she was an American, which made her a stranger not only to the British Empire, but also to the British community in Sandakan, Borneo. She was, in a sense, doubly alienated. Due to this complex situation, without any other choice, Keith's life was brought into a liminal space: coloniser and colonised, British and American, white and native etc. In the liminal space as such, being an outsider, her identity ceased to be a static one, but became the one that was always, as Homi Bhabha put it, under "on-going negotiation" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 3). Negation was undeniably inherent in affirmation. In other words, she always was and simultaneously was not a coloniser, British and a part of Borneo. Agnes Keith wrote her very first work living in such an unstable condition. Therefore, *Land* can conceivably be taken as a documentation of her negotiation of identity as an outsider who happened to be in the situation in which she was. Moreover, since *Land* was written based upon her on-site observation, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that it is a documentation of her gaze upon various subjects in Borneo. There, her identity was, as discussed above, never stable. At times, her account was no more than that of the British Empire Builders, and other times however, it was totally otherwise.

6.1. Colonial Gaze.

As both Patricia Regis and John Macartney mentioned (Keith, 2010, pp. x, xv), Agnes Keith undoubtedly had great affection towards both the land and the people of Borneo. However, at times, her gaze tended to be that of conventional Orientalist.

One good example is manifest in her description of her servants in the household. In the Part I of the novel, after generally introduced herself, her husband and how she ended up living in Borneo, she moved on to introduce the five servants who she needed in order to take care of both herself and her husband.

In representing her servants, Agnes Keith put her enthusiasm especially on her favorite servant Ah Yin, a Chinese amah. The description of Ah Yin goes as follows:

Ah Yin, our number-one amah, is known to us as the Pearl without Price, for among the local amahs, of Borneo, she is the jewel of the Orient set in the ear of the sow. Ah Yin is young, attractive-looking, scrupulously well-groomed, and she has two expressions; one is that of smiling very happily, and the other that of weeping sadly. Thus the impassive Oriental (Keith, 2010, p. 35)

Unlike the descriptions of her other servants, here, one can easily detect the Agnes Keith's special fondness towards both the apparent physical feature and the oriental character of Ah Yin. Though the servant was her favorite, the way Keith represented her is undoubtedly Orientalist in nature. Especially noticeable is the curious simplification of Ah Yin's expressions into only two; smiling and weeping. Ah Yin was Agnes Keith's favorite servant, thus, indeed, she appears several times in her writing, and interestingly, in those places, Ah Yin shows far more complex expressions than mere smiling and weeping.

Nevertheless, Ah Yin is introduced to the readers as dehumanised stereotypical “jewel of the Orient ” (Keith, 2010, p. 35).

This stereotypical Oriental figure is further enhanced by the picture of Ah Yin drawn by the author herself (Figure 01).



Figure 01. The picture of Ah Yin drawn by the author herself. (Keith, 2010, p. 37)

The small round shoulder and the hands aimlessly hanging in front of her make her body appear to be ever more “impassive” and unconfident. Furthermore, the body clad in—seemingly—Baju Kebaya barely has distinct waist, and the face—flat-nosed, wide forehead and eyes with long uplifted tapering slits—partially covered with shadow show that the female servant was rather a girl than a matured woman. Ah Yin’s femininity, though Agnes Keith emphasises that “Ah Yin is very feminine”(Keith, 2010, p. 37), is infantilised, and in this case, it is Ah Yin’s Oriental-ness rather than her personal character, that is foregrounded.

Agnes Keith’s colonial gaze is also evident when Kuta—one of her servants’ wife— was pregnant for the fourth time. Agnes and Harry Keith were both extremely excited about Kuta being pregnant again, and this time, they were determined to be even more committed to the safe delivery of the child. She disclosed the reason lying behind their commitment saying:

But it was not only our paternal affection which determined us that the coming child should have every opportunity for survival. We had both come to love the country in which we lived, and to cherish a dream of the preservation of its native races. Arusap and Kuta were both pure-blooded Muruts, members of a rapidly dwindling group of aboriginal Borneo pagans. There was something implicit in this coming babe, the flesh of two pagans and the blood of a dying race, something implicit that was greater than any individual (Keith, 2010, p. 101)

Among Agnes Keith's remarks in her work, this statement, or it might better be taken as declaration, is astonishingly Orientalist. The striking words "paternal affection" instantly put Agnes and Harry, and Arusap and Kuta into the conventional colonial dichotomy: matured 'us' and immatured 'them'. Without an appropriate fatherly guidance, the 'children' would not successfully deliver their own child.

Besides, as clearly expressed in the quotation above, the servants are taken rather as specimens, or samples of dying species than live human beings. Since both of them were "pure-blooded", and therefore had to be "preserved". Seen from that perspective, the Keiths' extraordinary commitment indicates that it was—at least for them—rather 'their' experimental project than that of Arusap and Kuta. That is why they were proud of 'themselves' when they brought the seven-week-old baby of Arusap and Kuta to the baby show at Government House. Among various babies of different ethnic groups, Bayong, the newborn baby, attracted much more attention than any other ones there, and thus, the baby received a prize for "being judged the finest native specimen in the competition" (Keith, 2010, p. 105). With that outcome, Agnes and Harry Keith were quite happy that they were not able to hide their pride at the triumph of their "joint production" (Keith, 2010, p. 105).

6.2. Ambivalence in the Colonial Gaze

However, this triumphant mood was instantly overturned only shortly after the show at Government House brought them the joy. It was only three days after the event that Bayong, the baby of Arusap, suffered sudden serious sickness, and shortly after Agnes Keith was informed of it, passed away.

This sudden death evoked anguish, and simultaneously, doubt about the superiority of West in the mind of Keith. After she was informed of the critical condition of the baby, Agnes Keith rushed to the telephone and made an emergency call to the doctor who just had consulted the baby only a short while ago, though the doctor was away and the call was entertained by his assistant. Even though she told the doctor that the baby was suffering a fatal condition and it was necessary that he tell her exactly what to do to save the baby's life, the doctor coldly answered it was only a minor stomach upset caused by the inappropriate habit of natives giving babies inappropriate food, and that immediate consultation was unnecessary. Apparently, the doctor's diagnosis was wrong and the baby went lifeless in the arms of Keith while she was making the phone call.

Looking into the submissive faces of her servants, she saw "conviction that the new world of white men and doctors was only as the old world of natives and midwives, helpless in the hands of destiny" (Keith, 2010, p. 107). Agnes Keith believed in the efficiency of Western medicine, insisting that "Arusap should forbid Kuta's return to the kampong so that the child might be born in Sadakan under a doctor's care" thinking that the baby would grow up safe that way (Keith, 2010, p. 100). Yet, even under the doctor's care, the baby could not live more than a year, perhaps because of the very sense of superiority in which Agnes Keith believed. In the argument with the assistant doctor who answered Agnes Keith's phone call, she was evidently critical about the sense of superiority indicated by the assistant doctor saying, "Civilized! I snorted. "Civilized! When all we civilized people have destroyed ourselves there will still be savages living happily in the hills of uncivilized countries!" (Keith, 2010, p. 112). The ambivalence is even more evident in her comments: "How I hate this Eastern attitude which even you Chinese yourselves have that a European life is precious and an Asiatic life valueless!" (Keith, 2010, p. 111).

6.3. Gaze That Troubles and Solves Identity

This ambivalence of Agnes Keith let her further ventured into a taboo territory. On one day in a jungle travel, Agnes Keith drew a picture of Apul, one of the native staff accompanied Harry and Agnes in the travel. In the process of drawing, Agnes indulged herself into a scandalously sensual imagination.

At the beginning, her gaze was rather anatomical focusing predominantly on Apul's mere physical features such as looped hair, Mongoloid cheekbones and eye sockets. However, when it came to describing his jawbone, she digressed into a grey zone saying, "Probably a very weak character, really, and like putty in the hands of his wife!" (Keith, 2010, p. 297).

Her imagination accelerated furthermore as her gaze moved from Apul's face to his body writing:

He is naked, but he doesn't look undressed. Neck rooted in bull shoulders. Near, compact, hard little hips. He is beautiful, and he doesn't know it. Body probably functions perfectly. What would it be like to have a body like that? What would it be like to be Apul's wife? (Keith, 2010, p. 297)

Agnes maintained to be the spectator in the first half of the quotation above describing the physical feature of Apul praising every part of it. However, her position as a spectator changed as her imagination delved into the function of body. Perhaps, the masculine feature of Apul's body unavoidably connected Agnes' mind to the indirectly sexual imagination. She imagined herself being Apul's wife indicating the possibility of having sexual intercourse with him.

Even though she denied the "pervert" possibility swiftly after she mentioned it, her position as the spectator became vague when she stepped into the forbidden terrain almost falling into 'the lure of tropics'. She became a part of the spectacle right at the moment she imagined herself being a part of the life of Apul. As in the Foucault's analysis of *Les Meninas*, there, "the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange", and it is there that the "subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity"(Foucault, 1994, pp. 4-5).

Agnes Keith, here, due to her gaze, was simultaneously the subject and object. She was the one who was looking at Apul, the model, but in her silent imagination, she was imagining herself being the wife of the indigenous man. In fact, she was being a part of her object at the very moment she was observing him. In this context, her gaze, which, at times worked as a colonial apparatus, also troubled her identity as a subject. Still, this intriguing aspect of her gaze is not the essential nature of it. In fact, we argue, the true function of it is, though seemingly contradicting, to secure her identity instead of troubling. If one takes into consideration the context in which this sensual scene is originally situated, the actual intention of Keith becomes clear. This scene took place, as mentioned earlier, in the course of jungle travel. Agnes Keith accompanied her husband, and as they traveled further deep into the jungle, multiple physical and psychological constraints had placed tension between Harry and Agnes. While Harry—having been accustomed to travelling in the jungle—was seemingly able to bear the harsh condition in the jungle; unceasing leech bites, inflaming scratches, Agnes was, though she tried, could not without reporting the problems to Harry, which apparently irritated him.

In result of Agnes' incompetency in the jungle—she thought—Harry was annoyed with her (Keith, 2010, p. 295), and it got even worse as the trip went on. Initially, she complained about the sheer condition

in the jungle and reported them to Harry, but it reached to a point where she no longer even did so. Finally, they did not talk to each other any more even when they were in camp. She started to think Harry didn't look at her eyes any more (Keith, 2010, p. 296). In short, she thought he did not love her any more.

It is in this very context that the aforementioned scene is situated. With this contextualisation in mind, the seemingly scandalous imagination of Agnes is no longer scandalous. Although Hull and Pakri (2015a) identified this imagination of Keith with that of the lure of the tropics that the white men (p. 107), it appears to be of slightly different nature if it is considered in the context, as the imagination derived from Harry's negation of—so she thought—Agnes as his wife. The loneliness caused by the negation by her husband meant denial of her identity as the wife of colonial officer. As Agnes was in Borneo just because she got married to Harry, she would lose her *raison d'être* in the foreign country should the marriage status is somehow denied. Therefore, in this case, the sensual imagination should rather be considered a part of Agnes' exploration of identity seeking a kind of reconciliation than a manifestation of her sexual impulse. Thus, it is quite natural that Agnes said she “felt like my picture was being hung in the Louvre” when Harry came into the tent after she finished drawing and praised it (Keith, 2010, p. 300). She was craving for Harry's attention.

The casual venture into the taboo territory was, therefore in this sense, an attempt—whether it was successful or not—to re-ascertain her identity as wife of colonial officer. Her gaze here certainly obscures the apparent dichotomy of spectator/spectacle and coloniser/colonised, but the prompt negation of the possibility of becoming the wife of Apul ensures her identity again. Agnes' denial of being a part of the indigenous community is a strategic creation of the Other, as doing so stabilises her position of subject as Sartre (1969), said:

If in general there is an Other, it is necessary above all that I be the one who is not the Other, and it is in this very negation effected by me upon myself that I make myself be and that the Other arises as the Other (p. 283).

By temporarily identifying herself with the ‘natives’ risking her own identity, Agnes created the chaotic situation in which her subjectivity dissolves only to be reassembled and negotiated later on. It is a self-gratification sort of simulated loss of subjectivity rather than a dangerous attempt of a white woman.

7. Conclusion

This study presented an analysis of Agnes Keith's gaze in her first autobiographical semi-fictional novel *Land Below the Wind* with reference to the concepts of gaze suggested by Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre.

As a result of the research, we found that, possessing a unique background, Agnes Keith's gaze also had a unique nature and function in the work. At times, she represented the place and the people in the way that conventional Orientalists did; over simplification, stereotyping, infantilising and so forth. However, her gaze sometimes also troubled and simultaneously resolved her own identity. Though recent attempts of the scholars certainly created an open ground for discussion, there is still a plenty room for further discussion. Therefore, we sincerely hope that the present study had added useful information to the literature for further discussion in the future.

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