



## JOSEPH CONRAD: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

**Sambit Panigrahi**

*Asst. Professor of English Ravenshaw University, Cuttack*

**Key Words:** *Colonialism, impressionism, globalization, postcolonialism, narratology*



*Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at [www.srjis.com](http://www.srjis.com)*

Joseph Conrad has been an eminent author of the modern times and his colonial writings do present a critique of the hypocritical nature of European imperialism. Many of his works are highly impressionistic in nature because of their graphic, physical representations of not only the physical landscapes of the colonized world but also the cultural ethos of the different people of those lands. But at the same time, it must not be forgotten that Conrad does probe into the inmost recesses of the characters of his works and make a thorough investigation into the abounding complexities of the human mind. In other words, Conrad's works are also psychological treatises where one can trace his insightful probe into the various complex processes that underlie the intricate workings of the human mind. Based on these precepts, this article intends to present a totalitarian picture of Conrad's oeuvre with special emphasis to his writing style, the themes and concerns of his works, the broader messages and undertones that his works exude. On the whole, this article intends to not only situate Conrad not only in his immediate context of colonialism and globalization, but also intends to establish him as a keen analyst of human mind. .

Joseph Conrad is the most eminent symptom of twentieth century literary cosmopolitanism. Emancipated from the narrow regional interest, he travelled and travelled widely all across the world and his novels are the testimony of his cultivated global outlook. Born of an exile Polish patriot in Ukraine, Conrad was intended for the university but as he was determined to go to sea he went to Marseilles in 1874 and joined the French mercantile marine and subsequently the British merchant service. Experience is the greatest asset of a literary artist and Conrad's wide ranging experience starting from the far eastern seascapes to the coastline of central America refined his literary sensibility towards perfection. He saw life

in its different colours from a close proximity; felt every bit of it; its richness, its absurdity, its profusion, its enigma and the result was a treasure house of novels that are unparalleled in their realistic flavor. Conrad is regarded as the greatest modern romantic, but his romanticism is not the progeny of imagination, it is rather the manifestation of realism romanticized.

Besides *Heart of Darkness*, which in fact, is universally acknowledged as the writer's magnum opus, Conrad's other most notable works include *Almayer's Folly*, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, *Lord Jim: A Tale*, *Nostramo: The Tale of a Seaboard*, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*, *Under the Western Eyes* and scores of others that do not need mentioning. *Almayer's Folly*, set in a vivid tropical background, presents the study of a white man whose moral stamina gets sapped by the insidious influence of the tropics. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, is a moving tale of life on boardship remarkable for its powerful atmosphere and its sea descriptions. Like good, evil is also an inevitable part of Nature and Conrad seems to be more sensitive in his approach in the depiction of evil and corruption. Donokin, in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, is one of the best of Conrad's many vividly drawn villains. The predominance of evil makes us feel the necessity of good to maintain balance and here, we discover Conrad's inherent virtuosity.

Man is the most mysterious creation of god and a proper understanding of human psychology needs a deep probe into its inmost arena. Conrad's frequent encounter with diverse situations and different human beings during his prolonged sea-voyage highly intensified his power of psycho-analysis. Proper study of mankind is man and Conrad is a man having that proper study of mankind. Conrad's *Lord Jim*, is the study of men whose strength fails them in a moment of crisis and is again the story of sea. In it, Conrad introduces for the first time his technique of oblique-narrative; the story being told through an ironical Marlow who reappears so frequently in his later novels. Revolution is a recurrent phenomenon in the history of human civilization where the colonized man persistently struggles against the hegemonic power configuration of the imperial forces to preserve his position and Conrad has a keen acquaintance with various revolutions of the world. His *Nostramo*, shifts the scene to the coastline of central America. Its story of revolution is grippingly told and the book is full of vivid descriptions and has many well-drawn portraits. Conrad also tried his hands at the detective stories probably to meet the demands of the modern readers for horror and suspense stories and his novel *The secret Agent*, suggests quite powerfully the atmosphere of the underworld. Conrad's sufficient awareness of the history of Russian Revolution is evident from *Under the Western Eyes*, in which he introduces the character Razumov. Conrad's craftsmanship in creating characters and situations with whom

the reader readily identifies himself is unquestionable. Conrad creates his own world where sea voyage is the main course of action and through his subtle observation, he makes explicit the hierarchical power structures in the colonized world where the hegemonic imperial forces impose their subversive authoritarianism on the subalterns. Of Conrad's other novels *The Rescue: A Romance of the Shallows*, is long drawn out, but has interpolations of high excitement and is an excellent study of primitive men. In this novel, it can be marked that Conrad rises above the limits of temporality which of course means that he does not write novels of his contemporary times only, but he writes things through which one can always connect to the past. In other words, he has a discerning eye to see the presence of past in the present. The narrative technique of the mentioned novel clearly demonstrates that the 'present' has its roots in the past and is somehow or other guided by the 'presentness' of the past. Man is a constantly changing product of a Darwinian evolution starting from this primitive stature up to the present postmodern one. But the primitive man with all its raw impulses; its primitive mode of life and with its simplistic form of mind still remains a fascinating subject for study. Conrad's *The Rescue*, one can see, is something like a documentary on the primitive mode of life style of the primitive man. In *An Outcast of the Islands*, the relationship of the white and civilized Willems and the dark and savage Aissa concretizes the agony of Willems after being abandoned as an outcast from his kind. Conrad's presentation of Willem perhaps throws some light on his own horror of abandon from his kind for Willems' loss of self is insistently depicted as an experience of death in the novel. However, in this novel Conrad's idea of colonialism is not distinct enough as he presents a vivid picture of exploitation of the subalterns by the colonizers but at the same time, he feels the horror of abandon from his own race. Being highly impressed by Conrad's artistry as a novelist F.R. Leavis, the famous new critic writes in his *The Great Tradition*: "Conrad is among the very greatest novelists in the language or any language." Based on the anarchist and terrorist activities in London, his novel *The Secret Agent*, has been described by Dr Leavis as "indubitably a classic and a masterpiece."

In his critical biography of the author, Jocelyn Bains places the Conradian novel *Victory: An Island Tale*, among Conrad's best novels. According to this famous critic of Conrad, the author has mostly been innovative in his approach and sought his subject whenever he could expect to find adventure in an unusual or exotic setting. He possesses a precocious faculty of imagination to think beyond the limits of possibility and makes the impossible possible with his immaculate artistry. He makes a perfect blending of imagination and experience so as to attain a sort of completeness in his fiction where thought and feeling

share equal proportions. His own experience of the sea, especially of Malayan waters was of immense value to him as a writer and it provided him with the plot for his fiction. Conrad has just to weave a tapestry of imagination around the bulk of realism to form an amalgamated composite whole. While he is an excellent story teller who gives deep thought to his technique of presentation, his prime concern is character in the tracing of the life of a man in such a way as to illuminate the inmost recesses of his soul. A master of narratology Conrad's preoccupation with the inmost recesses of human psychology establishes him as a supreme character-analyst, but at the same time, his capacity to explore the outer world of nature cannot be denied. About Conrad's subjectivity Leagouis & Cazamian write:

His art is the most composite product. However essential may be the element of original initiative in his development of the form which he took up either form instinctive choice or because he had experienced its appeal had been created by others. It is the novel of adventure whose new possibilities Stevenson and already Kipling were illustrating and he combined with it the objective spirit of French naturalism. The movement and method of his psychology; the attention he pays to the various points of view which cross and recross one another round each being, owe something to Henry James. Lastly a background of Shaw sensibility and the spirit of Russian novelists are betrayed in the special quality of his philosophy of life in these words.

(Legouis Cazamian, History of English Literature, 1332)

Conrad's view of life however seems to be a bit intricate and hence, Thomas Moser summarizes his view of life in these words: "On the surface Conrad's ethic seems very simple indeed. Humanity is important, fidelity in the highest virtue. When we come to consider this ethic in relation to the action of the characters, we shall see that Conrad's interests are much more subtle and complex than these two simple ideas suggest. But we should be misreading him if we failed to appreciate the strength of his intellectual and emotional allegiance to stoic humanism."

(H.M. Daleski the way of dispossession, 75)

Instead of straight forward analysis of character Conrad prefers an objective detachment and presents his people in a series of brief illuminating flashes which by the end of his novels have cohered into subtly studied and vital individuals. His insight into motives and impulses is deep when he is dealing either with the savages or whites demoralized by

their environment. His characters, both men and women are drawn from a wide range of experiences that the writer himself had undergone in his life. They are rarely commonplace and some of his best are dyed-in the wool villains like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, and Donokin in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. Conrad's art of characterization is unique and unique in the sense that Conrad is too selective in his approach; his characters are not just commonplace individuals; but individuals whom Conrad attributes some typical peculiar characteristics. Conrad does not borrow his characters rather creates them. So far as his view of life is concerned, his view of life coincides with that of his contemporary Hardy. The philosophy of both these master-artists centers around a profound sense of the tragedy of life. For Hardy, happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain and for Conrad, life is a saga of temptations which leads to utter confusion and despair and hence the downfall. The only difference in their perception of life seems to be that Hardy rests too much upon chance and coincidence which, he believes, determine the destiny of humanity. But in this respect Conrad seems to be a bit existentialistic in his approach. All the objects of nature surrounding man are meaningless for him except for the fact that he renders meaning to them through his action. Man is altogether free to choose from among a multiplicity of possibilities. He certainly has the freedom of choice, but he is never free from responsibility. His misfortune is the outcome of his wrong choice of action and he is solely responsible for his misfortune. Conrad's characters, especially his villains suffer from an Aristotlean hamartia. Kurtz suffers from vaulting ambition in *Heart of Darkness*, and hence is responsible for his own damnation. In man's struggle against the hostile forces; in his display of loyalty courage and endurance in the face of heavy odds, Conrad discovers his tragic philosophy of life—the philosophy arising from the perplexity of doubt and despair. Conrad is a profound thinker, but has nothing to do with the sociological or problem novels. Conrad exempts himself from too much of philosophizing; presents life as the senses perceive it and his novels are free from didacticism. He portrays life as it is, not as it should be. Yet from the frequency with which he portrays man of faith and courage determined to abide by their duty to their fellows, it is easy to see that for Conrad these were the prime virtues. As for technique, Conrad relies upon the method of 'oblique narrative' invented by himself- the story being told by an ironical narrator such as Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. The reason behind the application of the oblique-narrative method is probably to attain a sort of objective detachment and to ascribe a status of autonomy to the plot. Conrad's aim probably is to attain a sort of Arnoldian disinterestedness. The plot seems to move on its own without any deliberate intervention of the author himself. A student of such masters of the novel as Henry

James and the French writers Flaubert and Maupassant, Conrad is a conscious artist deeply concerned with the nature and method of his art. The *Shadow Line*, reveals him to be a master of the traditional direct narrative method, but much of his best work is in the oblique narrative method first used in *Lord Jim*. Presenting his material in an easy, conversational manner through the medium of a spectator such as Marlow, he gradually builds up a picture through a series of brief sense –impressions which only reveal their full significance when they finally come together into a complete whole. His thought process sometimes seems to be a bit implicit and complex, his narrative flow seems to be fractured at times and hence is demanded by the readers to be more direct and simple. But from another perspective it seems to be an ideal kind of narratology for the involvement of so much of psychological investigation in the character-analysis. His evocation of an atmosphere that best suits the plot and characters is tremendously powerful. The description of the sea, landscapes, hills and mountains of African jungles, and the unhygienic habitat of the natives of the colony presents a perfect semblance of reality before the readers and the readers readily identify themselves with those characters and situations. A quoted passage from the *Heart of Darkness*, describing the river Thames reveals Conrad's craftsmanship in the art of narratology:

“True, by this time it was not blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery– a white place for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river that your could see on the map resembling an immense snake uncoiled with its head in the sea; its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window. It fascinated me as a snake would be a bird; a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, accompany for trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself they cannot trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water-steamboats !Why should not I try to get charge of one? I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me.”

(Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 11-12)

Joseph Conrad's vocabulary shows all the concrete wealth of the Anglo-Saxon stock. Conrad is well-acquainted with the heightened effect of the Latin vocables; their glowing, luxuriant and habitually delightful effect and hence we can find in his works a conscious apprenticeship of Latin vocables. His prose style therefore leaves upon the ears of the readers



an impression of slightly exaggerated sonorousness and rhythm. But still, his prose style is one of the most individual and readily recognizable. The musical potentialities of his language decorated with alliterative measures attribute his prose style the qualifications of poetry. When he writes below his best, he can become over-ornamental, self-conscious and artificially stylized. His own views on style, he makes abundantly clear in this passage from the Preface to the *Nigger of the Narcissus*.

All art appeals primarily to the senses and the artistic aim when expressing in written words must also make its appeal through the senses if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting and to the magic suggestiveness of music which is art of arts. And it is only through complete unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discharged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity to colour; and the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words; of the old, old words worn thin defaced by ages of careless usage.'

(Joseph Conrad, Preface to the *Nigger of the Narcissus* 29)

The very title of the story contains the gist of the novel. Being a European, Conrad had seen the lights of civilization in the urban European culture, but when he moves to the savage centre of the African jungles, he sees, feels and perceives the all-pervading darkness throughout the continent. Inequality is the law of Nature; some are privileged, some get neglected, some exploit, some get exploited, some flourish beneath the light of civilization and there are some, who are born in darkness, grow like odious vermins in darkness and die in darkness. Nature divides and rules. This discrimination when felt, enlightens man and makes him conscious that he is a plaything in the hands of destiny. Conrad's felt experiences makes him realize that life is not all about happiness and prosperity, it can be painful and disastrously painful. After a brief discussion of the literary oeuvre of Conrad, one can have a feel of Conrad's deep insight into the immense complexities of human life and action. Though Conrad's literary oeuvre predominantly weaves around the predicament of the colonial explorers across the newly explored regions of the world, Conrad's deep probe into the general human nature is profound and thought-provoking. In his entire literary gamut, Conrad exclusively deals with themes, issues and concerns like the human predicament in a thoroughly alienated world, the impressionistic portrayal of the human-Nature encounter in

different exotic settings of the globe and above all, the immense psychic complexities that man harbours inside himself. On the whole, Conrad's entire oeuvre presents a wholistic picture of human life with a keen insightful probe into both the internal and external conditions of human existence.

### **Works Cited**

- Achebe, Chinua. "An image of Africa : Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" <<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/achcon.htm>>. 08. 03. 2016.
- Atkinson William. "Bound in Blackwood's ; The imperialism of *Heart of Darkness* in its Immediate Context." *Twentieth Century Literature* 50.3 (2004): 85-415. Print.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992. Print.
- Dareras, Jacques. *Joseph Conrad and the West: Signs of Empire*. Trans. Anne Luyat and Jacques Darras. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982. Print.
- Derrida, Jaques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse fo Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. 278-293.
- Erdinast –Vulcan, Daphna. "Some Millennial Footnotes on *Heart of Darkness*." *Conrad in the Twentieth Century : Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives*. Eds. Carola Kaplan, Peter Lancelot Mallios and Andrea White. New York: Routledge, 2005. 55-65. Print.
- Goldberg, David Theo. "The Ends of Race." *Postcolonial Studies* 7.3 (2004): 211-230. Print.
- Karl, Frederick R. and Laurence Davies. Eds. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Print.
- La Bossiere, Camille R. *Joseph Conrad and the Science of Unknowing*. Canada: York Press, 1979. Print.
- MacHale, Brain. "Introducing Constructing." *Constructing Postmodernism*. Routledge, London, 1992. 1-16. Print.
- Miller, Christopher L . "The Discoursing Heart : Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", *Joseph Conrad, (Ed.) Elaine Jordan, Houndmills, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996. 87-102. Print.*
- Spittles, Brian. "Heart of Darkness." *How to Study a Joseph Conrad Novel*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press ltd., 1990. Print. 30-46.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "A Dialogic Criticism." *Literature and its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth Century criticism*. Trans. Catherine Porter. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988. 155-168. Print.
- Watts, Cedric. "The Art of Conrad." *A Preface to Conrad*. London: Longman, 1982. Print. 111-74.
- Watts, Cedric. "Heart of Darkness." *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. J H Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 45-62. Print.
- Watt lan. "Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the Critics." *Essays on Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 85-96. Print.