INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (IJLLL)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online: 3049-3242 ISSN Print:
EDU SCHOOL ijlll.in

Joseph Conrad's Literary Landscape: Critical Reflections by An Indian Scholar

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Article information
Received: 6th September 2024
Received in revised form:10th October 202
Accepted: 7th November 2024
Available online: 7th January 2025

Volume:1
Issue: 1
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14608628

Abstract

This research article attempts an analysis of critical reviews of the literary works by Joseph Conrad, an English author of Polish origin. The writer is a seafarer and was passionate about exploration of the unknown regions as a sensitive human being of his times. He dreamt about his role as a mariner from his childhood days. He succeeded in his goal and achieved to a large extent. At the same time, he desired to be a writer and got success as a modern English writer. Some of his narratives have been critically appreciated by many critics and reviewers of the following periods. This article includes some of those critical works and the scholar's own point of view.

Keywords: - Joseph Conrad, English, Narrative, Auto/Biography, European Imperialism, History, Politics and geography

Introduction

"Writing is a treadmill", says Joseph Conrad to William Rothenstein who made a painting of Conrad on suggestion by Ford Madox Hueffer, the new owner of The Pent, the farmhouse earlier occupied by Conrad and Crane. When Conrad was asked for a sitting with the painter Rothenstein, he gave consent for a week-end. About his meeting with Conrad, he mentions: "One sees more of a man by staying with him for a week-end than by meeting him a dozen times at London parties. Conrad had met few painters and was curious about the painter's outlook on life. With his piercing eyes and keen, deeply-lined bearded face, in some ways he looked like the sea captain, but his nervous manner, his rapid, excited speech, his restlessness, his high shoulders, didn't suggest the sailor. I accepted him at once as an artist; never, I thought, I had met anyone with a quicker apprehension, with such warmth of intellectual sympathy, sympathy which came half-way with everything what one said. This

warmth, not uncommon between young artists, was rare in a man so much my senior as Conrad was; but as a practising artist I was, Conrad pointed out, his senior; for I had begun to paint before he had thought of writing." (Rothenstein 143)

Edward Said wrote an essay entitled "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative" in 1974 on the writing style of Joseph Conrad. In the opening paragraph of the essay, he writes: "In this essay I hope to be able to show that both in his fiction and his autobiographical writing Conrad was trying to do something that his experience as a writer revealed to be impossible. This makes him interesting as the case of a writer whose working reality, his practical and even theoretical competence as a writer, was far in advance of what he was saying. Occurring at the time at which he lived and wrote, this irony of Conrad's writing therefore has a critical place in the history of the duplicity of language, which since Nietzsche, Marx and Freud has made the study of the orders of language so focal for the contemporary understanding. Conrad's fate was to have written fiction great for its presentation, and not only for what it was representing. He was misled by language even as he led language into a dramatization no other author really approached." (Said 116)

Conrad desired to be a seaman as a child. He writes in his autobiography:

> "Once only did that enthusiasm (for geography) expose me to the derision of my schoolboy chums. One day, putting my finger on a spot of the then white heart of Africa, I declared that someday I would go there… about eighteen years afterwards, a wretched little sternwheel steamboat I commanded lay moored to the bank of an African river. I was glad to be alone on deck, smoking the pipe of peace after an anxious day … Away in the middle of the stream, on a little island nestling all black in the foam of the broken water, a solitary little light glimmered feebly, and I said to myself in awe, "This is the very spot of my boyhood boast." (Conrad 1924).

Marlow in the award-winning novel entitled *Heart of Darkness* makes the following statement echoing the above idea: "Now when I was a little chap, I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (…) I would put my finger on it and say, when I grow up I will go there. The north pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven't been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour is off. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been on some of them, and … well, we won't talk about that. But there was one yet- the biggest, the most blank, so to speak- that I had a hankering after." (HoD, 21)

John G. Peters in *The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad* (2006) introduces the new readers of Conrad's works in a methodical way. He has overviewed his biography and works. He carefully describes the connection between the events of the writer's life and connects them with his stories and novels. The general pattern of the first twenty years of Conrad's life as a writer has been agonizing and distressful. There is uncertainty about the value of the produced work by the immigrant author who has no mastery of English. His novel Chance, one of Conrad's weakest novels was the best seller with the general public and gave him a financial stability and fame. Many critics reviewed it as the weakest and thereafter they found a decline in quality of the later works. Conrad's literary career has been analysed in three aspects, including biographical, historical and interpretative. Peters has rearranged the chapters under four umbrella terms, such as history and politics, cultural issues, philosophical milieu, and movements in art and literature. All readers have been provided with a signpost at the interpretative crossroads.

J. Aubry in the book entitled *Joseph Conrad. Life and Letters* (1927) writes how Conrad complained against various tags used to describe him- "spinner of sea yarns, master mariner, seaman writer" and expressed his longings in the following sentences: "I was in hopes that on a general survey it could also be made an opportunity for me to get freed from that infernal trail of ships and that obsession of my sea life which has about as much bearing on my literary existence, on my quality as a writer, as the enumeration of drawing rooms which Thackeray frequented could have had on his gift as a great novelist […]. Of course there are seamen in a good many of my books. That doesn't make them sea stories […]. I do wish that all those ships of mine are given a rest […]. (Aubry 316)

Joseph Conrad who was born in Poland with the family name Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski on December 3, 1857 became an English citizen and was widely known as the author Conrad. His native place was not in the contemporary map of Europe. Conrad grew up in Russia that was under the rule of Tsars. His father Apollo Korzeniowski was a patriot and belonged to the land-owning class of Poland. He took part in the historical movement and struggled as a freedom fighter to free his motherland from the rule of Russian imperialists. When Conrad was four years old, his family was exiled to the remote place called Vologda in 1861. After his mother's death in 1865, his father moved to Lwow along with his son. His father was a poet, translator, and dramatist. Conrad learnt to read a lot of European literature as a child and began to write creatively. After his father's death in 1869, he was brought up by his maternal uncle. His early life of formative years was a life of isolation, sickness and intense emotional despair. Due to regular ill health, he had occasional schooling and mostly taught by tutors at home. His uncle namely Thaddeus Bobrowski became father, friend and financial mentor of Conrad till his death in 1894.

As a young person, Conrad was a dreamer of a maritime life in future. He was an orphan at an early age, but continued his primary and secondary education. He read books about travel, exploration and narratives of maritime adventures. By 1874, he was determined to travel to France in order to join the French merchant marine. Poland that is his homeland was not a free country. His five years at Marseilles in France were the most memorable period of life. From his letters, we can see the instances of his earlier adventures. He formed a syndicate with three persons and acquired a small vessel called *Tremolino*. They were engaged in gun-running between France and Spain. Unfortunately, the vessel was ambushed and lost after the treachery of one of the crew. Conrad's first attempt to end his life by suicide was avoided due to his responsible uncle who not only rushed to nurse the victim but also to pay his debts connected with the deal. In his work entitled "An Outpost of Progress", we can find one of the central characters attempting to commit suicide like the author. He lost his reputation in France and arrived in London to secure his life as a seaman.

With a minimum English vocabulary, he struggled to acquire the skills necessary for the seamanship. Conrad passed the examination to work as second mate in the British merchant navy in June 1880. Next year in April 1881, he joined the vessel Palestine that was a bark of 425 tons. This move by him proved to be an important turning point in his life as an immigrant in London. He went to the far East for the first time in his life and during his continuously troubled voyage he accumulated materials for his literary creations to be done in future life. The cargo caught fire and the crew had to take to the life boats. Conrad's landing on an island of Sumatra took place after thirteen-and-a-half-hour voyage in an open boat. In 1898, he published this account of his experiences in the short story "Youth" with slight alterations. That is a remarkable tale of a young officer's first command in a vessel.

Conrad returned back to London by a passenger steamer and in September 1883 he shipped as mate on the Riversdale, leaving her at Madras to join the Narcissus at Bombay. This voyage gave him experiences and materials for his later novel titled *The Nigger of the*

"Narcissus". He began to write his early letters in English around 1884. In 1886, he passed his first mate's certificate examination. He not only obtained his master mariner's certificate but also became a British citizen in August 1886. In February 1887, he sailed as the first mate on the Highland Forest bound for Java island in the East. The captain of the vessel John McWhirr has been portrayed as the captain of Nan Shan vessel in the novel *Typhoon*. He joined another vessel called Vidar and explored the world in four-and-a-half-month voyage. All these experiences inspired him to write his earlier works. His first command of Otago sailing from Bangkok enabled him to write stories such as "The Shadow Line" and "Falk".

He obtained his job as an officer in an English clipper to begin his journey to Australia. Every aspect of Conrad's youth and early life was affected by the Tsarist rule in Russia and Russian occupation of Poland. Andrew White mentions that "inheritance was both a sensitivity to oppressive autocracy and a profound scepticism about the idealism of social, and particularly nationalistic movements". Conrad by now has acquired a trilingual and tricultural identity. He belonged to no place as a citizen entirely, but has a marginal and hybrid identity. He was excited to mingle with the rich, cosmopolitan and aristocratic crowd of Europe and created an image of the "homo duplex" (Polish nobleman and British citizen) for himself.

Conrad who had a different passion in life decided to end the life of a mariner and begin a new profession as an author. He knew no English at the age of twenty, but he wrote the first short story "The Black Mate" in the same year. A man of sea had to make use of words for creative writing in order to fill in the infinite boring hours at sea and inside the vessel. He started writing his diaries and journals regularly. He was waiting for his next assignment putting himself in a rented accommodation near the Thames in 1889 and began to write his first novel under the title of *Almayer's Folly* (1895). A series of novels were published by this new novelist. They include *Lord Jim, The Nigger of the Narcissus, Heart of Darkness, Nostromo, Typhoon, The Secret Agent, Under Western Eyes, Victory* and *Chance*. Conrad saw life as a test and everything in life as prelude to the great test that might take place. The sea is a strong image in all these narratives and refer to the uncertainties and occasional encounters of life. Conrad's life as a mariner as well as a sensitive author had experience of the two European empires, Russian and British, along with his own nationalism as a native of Poland. He had been able to formulate his own ideology through his narratives that have attracted attention of modern readers and critics. His works have been analysed from the Marxist, feminist and postcolonial perspectives. European imperialism and its impact on him have been the theme of many critical discourses of his fictional narratives.

Ford Madox Hueffer, in the Preface to the book entitled *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (1925), mentions: "For, according to our view of the thing, a novel should be the biography of a man or of an affair, and a biography, whether of a man or an affair, should be a novel, both being, if they are efficiently performed, renderings of such affairs as are our human lives." When we will look at the "Author's Note" of the book *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, we can find the following paragraphs at the beginning:

> "*Nostromo*" is the most anxiously meditated of the longer novels which belong to the period following upon the publication of the "Typhoon" volume of short stories.
>
> I don't mean to say that I became then conscious of any impending change in my mentality and in my attitude towards the tasks of my writing life. And perhaps there was never any change, except in that mysterious, extraneous thing which has nothing to do with the theories of art; a subtle change in the nature of the inspiration; a phenomenon for which I cannot in any way be held responsible. What, however, did cause me some concern was that after finishing the last story of the "Typhoon" volume it seemed somehow that there was nothing more in the world to write about.

> This so strangely negative but disturbing mood lasted some little time; and then, as with many of my longer stories, the first hint for "Nostromo" came to me in the shape of a vagrant anecdote completely destitute of valuable details." (Conrad 1875-1876)

In the opening paragraph of his chapter on Joseph Conrad in the book entitled *The Common Reader First Series* (1925), Virginia Woolf writes: "Suddenly, without giving us time to arrange our thoughts or prepare our phrases, our guest has left us; and his withdrawal without farewell or ceremony is in keeping with his mysterious arrival, long years ago, to take up his lodging in this country. For there was always an air of mystery about him. It was partly his Polish birth, partly his memorable appearance, partly his preference for living in the depths of the country, out of ear-shot of gossips, beyond reach of hostesses, so that for news of him one had to depend upon the evidence of simple visitors with a habit of ringing door-bells who reported of their unknown host that he had the most perfect manners, the brightest eyes, and spoke English with a strong foreign accent." Woolf writes further about Conrad's creativity in the following paragraph: "Picture after picture he painted thus upon that dark background; ships first and foremost, ships at anchor, ships flying before the storm, ships in harbour; he painted sunsets and dawns; he painted the night; he painted the sea in every aspect; he painted the gaudy brilliancy of Eastern ports, and men and women, their houses and their attitudes. He was an accurate and unflinching observer, schooled to that "absolute loyalty towards his feelings and sensations", which, Conrad wrote, "an author should keep hold of in his most exalted moments of creation". And very quietly and compassionately Marlow sometimes lets fall a few words of epitaph which remind us, with all that beauty and brilliancy before our eyes, of the darkness of the background."

Most critics of earlier periods have done the thematic study of his novels. They have analysed and published their views on his treatment of European imperialism, colonialism, life of Africans in the Congo region, human relations, treatment of black people by the whites, etc. Edward Said describes Africa of the pre-nineteenth century era as an "imaginative geography" (*Orientalism*). Conrad wrote to the publisher regarding the story "An Outpost of Progress" in the following paragraph: "It is a story of the Congo. There is no love in it and no woman- only incidentally." He wrote down the most common incidents of his life as a seaman in a lonely station on the Kassai and put the insignificant events that brought the catastrophe aside. Conrad shares with William Blackwood about the title of "Heart of Darkness" for his new narrative but he admits that the narrative is not gloomy. The centre of darkness is not merely Africa but the darkness that prevails within the white race, within our minds. The narrative is an examination of the encounter between truth and image, abstraction and concreteness, darkness and illumination. The white men's mission of civilizing the colonized in India, Africa, Australia, Canada and other British colonies was to be criticized by a naturalized British subject who was a "Polish nobleman, cased in British tar". (*Letters* 52)

In the novel *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, we are given a portrayal of the seamen belonging to the generation of the narrator namely Singleton: "They had been strong, as those are strong who knew neither doubts nor hopes … Well-meaning people had tried to represent those men as whining over every mouthful of their food; as going about their work in fear of their lives. But in truth they had been men who knew toil, privation, violence, debauchery but knew not fear, and had no desire of spite in their hearts. Men hard to manage, but easy to inspire; voiceless men- but men enough to scorn in their hearts the sentimental voices that bewailed the hardness of their fate." (25) The narrator says of the old sailors as "the everlasting children of the mysterious sea", whereas the next generation of sailors are "the grown-up children of the discontented earth". Both generations are considered to be the children because they are incapable of the adult consciousness. They are a class of people caught between the land and the sea. They live their lives without any self-justification of their existence.

In 1889, the Congo Free State was only four-year-old as a political entity and was widely known notorious as a region of imperialistic exploitation. He commanded a Congo River steamboat. He went to Brussels and secured his appointment as the captain. What he saw, did and felt in the Belgian Congo are recorded in his classic *Heart of Darkness*. Everything in this part of the globe is corrupt and nihilistic. The inner self of the human being is also corrupt. The four persons who constitute the audience of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* are "uncritical products of a powerful maritime civilization" (Berthoud 42). On the deck of the yawl Nellie, they share the bond of the sea and wait for the tide to turn. This gave them a chance to review English history. England herself was an unknown territory receiving the attention of Roman invaders. English civilization looks like the "flicker" of 'a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightening'. British imperialism as an expansion of this new civilization is much less glamorous. Marlow echoes the storm of the earlier narrative and narrates the as follows: "The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight was like a rioting invasion of silent life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence." (HoD 86) The forest here resembles the sea to an extent. The story based on Conrad's traumatic experience is central to his work and vision. Kurtz's cry "The Horror! The Horror!" at the end of the novella was really the expression of Conrad, the seaman. He has suffered physical, psychological, and spiritual shocks in his life. His trip to the Congo region brought to him regular fever and sickness. He was worried for his acute gout pain. His protagonists suffer like him in the short stories and fictional narratives.

Marlow recognizes the members of the primitive race. In the following passage, we can have a glimpse of his encounter with the blacks: "Now and then a boat from the shore gave a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the whites of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks – these chaps, but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there." (61) Here Marlow's recognition of blacks is an acknowledgement of 'otherness' that is an important aspect of postcolonial narratives. The blacks are natives and belong to their own environment as their environment belongs to them. To Marlow, Africa and Congo may be strange, mystical and unintelligible, but not unreal. Like Conrad, his geographical and cultural dislocation from his own place and people makes him an alien in a foreign land. He feels that he is the colonizer and has the imperialist ideology. Kurtz is the representative of the British civilization and has been the chief agent of the Inner Station. It is Marlow's responsibility to locate Kurtz and bring him back to the mainstream. He realizes the power struggle happening between the manager of the Central Station and Kurtz. He becomes a part of the struggle. They are not here to do any missionary service to the blacks as a part of their civilizing mission but to exploit the local people economically by ivory trading and making them poor and sick.

Marlow realizes that Kurtz is a gifted creature and the gift of this person is his ability to speak. His words are the gifts. They are considered to be "the pulsating stream of light or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness". (114) His ability to talk enables him to acquire enormous power over the blacks. He ascends to a higher position due to the gift of speech and treats himself as their saviour or new god. In reality, he is hollow at the core and a complete sham. Gene Moore in his introduction to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2004) writes: "Conrad's academic reputation can be dated from 1948, when F. R. Leavis, the most influential British critic of his generation argued that Conrad's best work belonged to what he called the "great tradition" in English literature. Leavis considered *Heart of Darkness* a "minor work" and complained of its "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" (177); but *The Great Tradition* admitted Conrad to the academic canon and sanctioned his work

as a proper subject of literary criticism." (5) Albert J. Guerard called the novella "Conrad's longest journey into self" (33) in *Conrad the Novelist* (1958). Conrad's depiction of Africa as a place of unworthy of history or culture so angered the novelist Chinua Achebe that in 1977 he published an attack on Conrad that changed the very nature of Conrad Studies.

"In "An Image of Africa", Achebe accused Conrad of being a "bloody racist" who "had a problem with niggers"; and he argued that Heart of Darkness should be dropped from the canon as an "offensive and totally deplorable book", a story "in which the very humanity of black people is called in question." Achebe, qtd. in (Hamner 124-26).Achebe's attack on Conrad demanded a reply and critics "scrambled to find ways of proving that Conrad was not a racist" (Moore 6). The simple way of replying to Achebe is to have the following statement: "The heart of Conrad's darkness lies not only in Africa or in ancient London, but also in the bosom of the beholder, male or female, black or white." (Moore 7)

To conclude this essay, I would like to repeat the question asked by a scholar in his write up entitled "Is Joseph Conrad worth reading?". The answer is given at the beginning itself that Joseph Conrad is "definitely worth reading". He has used his long life spent on the sea and his knowledge of different unknown places and his experiences, happy and sorrowful for creating exotic tales for future readers like us. His works "demonstrate an unparalleled understanding and mastery of the tools required to tell an affecting story. Conrad also draws attention to a shared humanity greater than and capable of overcoming empire." He struggled to learn English language, its vocabulary and syntactical structures and used for creative pursuits. He became a British citizen but struggled to be accepted in the European literary circles. He failed during his life time but has inspired a lot of modern writers. He is regarded as a literary impressionist and an early modernist. He remains one of the most accomplished writers of the twentieth century. Readers would always be attracted to his works and many new writers will get inspiration from his works about narrative art, tools and skills of writing fiction.

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