

Conclusion

Conrad, more than most British novelists, was affected not only by important historical events in imperial Britain but also by those on the European continent, which began to be felt in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century and culminated at its close. As we have seen, his childhood and his youth were to colour his sceptical view of civilization and of humanity. World War I did reinforce his already dark perception of the world. Much of Conrad's time was spent in South-East Asia experiencing first the role of the conquering European nations in the non-European world. Furthermore, Conrad's briefer experience in Africa may be counted in that it influenced him and resulted in a masterpiece, *Heart of Darkness*. Tzarist Russia's rule of Poland has been of particular and long-lasting effect on Conrad. Throughout his life, he remained suspicious of all political activity, and his dark, sceptical outlook on the world can be traced to his early Polish and Russian history and politics. Although he wrote little that directly related to Poland, the latter's fate affected Conrad both directly and indirectly. The 1863 Polish uprising, his parents' voluntary participation in the event and its aftermath shaped Conrad's view of Russia and also coloured his view of revolution, revolutionaries, and politics in general, as is evident from the reading of his two late novels on anarchic and revolutionary cultures – *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*. His first hand experience of the empire and its self-conceited capitalistic exploits in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Western Europe itself made him aware that imperialistic enterprises were mere excuses to gain power and unlimited wealth under the pretence of 'civilizing missions'. In locating himself as an agency, writing between culture and empire, Conrad recognizes his own burden, that of the literary representation of a period of European history that witnessed the emergence of the a new voracious imperialism through capitalistic and colonial expansions in the world. Although he was deeply complicit in the imperialist project, first as a captain in the British Merchant Service and second as a citizen member of the British nationality, his fictional works expresses the disillusionment that prevailed as a result of the crying discrepancy between the humanitarian ideals and the reality of colonial exploitation and dehumanization. This signifies, in fact, the

British-Polish author's ambivalent narrative attitude towards issues of culture, both ethnic and political, and the question of empire.

Conrad's affiliation to the European imperial tradition and his acute awareness of non-European and revolutionary cultures, resulting from his first hand experiences of worldwide travel, is investigated in this thesis by reading five select novels, i.e., *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim: A Tale*, *Nostramo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* and *Under Western Eyes*, in relation to the socio-cultural and political milieu of the age in which they were produced. These explorations serve to focus his text's confluences with and divergences from a dominant ideology of the empire and their utterly indefinite textual inscriptions. In addition, putting Conrad's select texts into dialogue with other contemporary texts and his own non-fictional writings indicates something of the multiplicity of voices which speak within and against the dominant ideology of empire of a Western European society. Reading Conrad with his contemporaries in a number of narrative fields (travel and adventure writings, historical, anthropological and political essays) therefore produces both a methodology and a cultural context in which to read his novels. The analysis of the texts chosen is informed by various strands of contemporary literary theory which takes in post-structural, postcolonial, new historicist and psychoanalytic approaches as well as applying aspects of textual analysis. This methodology allows a reading of Joseph Conrad's texts which entangles the analysis of the empire's cultural perspective out of which he wrote. The present thesis tends to read his texts adequately placing him as a writer engaged with the discourse of new capitalism in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first ones of the twentieth century. Conrad's approach projects the lineaments of a critique of imperialism, but ultimately refuses what it uncovers by relapsing into an equivocal endorsement of the imperial system. To achieve this end, Conrad's novels have been put within a cultural frame in relation to the intellectual and political developments which informed his lived experiences and his creative imagination. This involves contextualising Conrad's writing within an emerging socio-cultural moment of a long drawn humanitarian tradition, reading his texts with the writings of his contemporaries that facilitate to produce a more ambiguous Conrad, writing between culture and empire.

The polarities present in a novel of Joseph Conrad may be viewed as characteristic of the ideological dualism that the author in question endured lifelong. Many critics have seen Conrad achieving a unity of sorts between the two discordant issues of culture and empire by preserving the distinctiveness of nations in his texts. Brian Spittles says, “Conrad constantly stressed both the difference of foreign cultures— seeing them in their own right, with their own values, not simply as amusing, or barbaric, variations from European definitions of civilization – and a possible fundamental unity of human experience” (1992: 17). Boehmer, on the other hand, addresses the “ambiguity of his representations” in her discussion on the colonial drama in *Lord Jim* and explains the issue of racial superiority of a white man that, however weak to hold to the end, underlies the true identity of Jim in Patusan (2006: 61). Conrad’s approach to empire consists of a crucial realization of its self-defined civilizing mission, where the power position of the capitalist empire rests both on the ‘otherness’ of the colonized cultures and the marginalized representations of any political resistance in the shapes of political anarchy or revolts. The culture, moral standard and the politics of the colonized and the antagonists on the fringes of the empire are represented by Conrad with feeling. But his imagination is unmistakably informed with the essential imperial ideas of cultural superiority. Boehmer perceives:

The insecurity surrounding colonial interpretation is widely reflected in imagery of the vastness and shapelessness of the other land. It is there in evocations of the terror contained in that shapelessness, as in Conrad’s African forest, and of the distressing opacity of the native peoples to European understanding, usually represented as their ignorance and dullness, their black magic and strange fetishism.... (89)

It is evident from the above discussion that the conclusion cannot be some smart generalization. That there is something in Conrad’s character that defies pinpointing may be gleaned from something that one finds in *Heart of Darkness*, when at the beginning Marlow was about to embark on his narrative, the primary

frame narrator predicted “that we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlowe’s inconclusive experiences” (Conrad, 1994: 6). The statement, made here, may connect well with what the same frame narrator said earlier of Marlow that “to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze” (5). Conrad’s mode of narration as referred to here is pristine in that it refuses closure. As Patrick Brantlinger says, the difficulty in fitting him to the sacrosanct canon of English imperial literature crops up “when Conrad is read sympathetically today, it is typically because of his modernist innovation and subsequent refusal to conform systematically to any single ideological position” (1985: 251). Some may go as far as to see schizophrenia in his contradictory purposes. That is what Brantlinger discovers in Fredric Jameson’s explications, while going through the latter’s *The Political Unconscious*. Brantlinger adds a little further down: “Conrad is simultaneously a critic of the imperialist adventure and its romantic fictions, and one of the greatest writers of such fictions, his greatness deriving partly from his critical irony and partly from the complexity of his style – his ‘impressionism’” (373-375).

As is seen above, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Nostramo*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* are all featured with his ambivalent ideological response to the social and political history of his time. The texts’ relevance to the political and historical issues such as imperialism, colonialism and capitalism paves the way for our consideration of reading them in the author’s ideological perspective, a reading, which aims to read the relationship between culture and empire in Conrad’s novels. The novels have been read in their biographical and cultural contexts to observe to what extent Conrad reflected the prevailing ideas of the time and to examine the nature of his ideology as reflected in his texts. The novels written in a period of imperialism and colonialism took their incidents and characters from the imperial world. Conrad himself was a member of the imperial culture and utilized his own experiences he gained as a seaman in the various terrains of the empire.

Heart of Darkness is partly based on Conrad’s four-month command of a Congo River steamboat. Conrad learned, during his journey, about atrocities made by the European explorers and traders in the Congo, and created, in the character of

Kurtz, the embodiment of European imperialism. Written several years after Conrad's gruelling sojourn in the Belgian Congo, the novel tells the story of Marlow, a seaman who undertakes his own journey into the African jungle to find the European trader, Kurtz. An attempt has been made to understand the extent of the effect of the imperial culture of the time on this widely read text of Conrad. The imperial literary culture of the late 19th century is put into a dialogue with the text as it deals with issues of culture and empire. Marlow, in the novel, believes in the benevolent light of civilization and Conrad, in his real life, believed that civilization had been brought to the Dark Continent by Europe; Marlow discovers the disappointing reality that, instead of civilization, barbarism has occurred in Africa and Conrad himself saw the disparity between his idealized expectations and the disappointing reality about colonialism. Through an intertextual study involving a parallel reading of *Heart of Darkness* and the travel narratives of the imperial era, it has been observed that Conrad was affected by the tradition of the empire in appropriating the marginalised version of a dark Africa. Conrad critiques the ideological assumptions behind the idea of empire in *Heart of Darkness* though his novel belongs to the same episteme. It has been indicated that the novel subverts the dominant ideology of the time, that is, imperialism and colonialism and the European consideration of 'the white man's burden' through its representation of imperialism and colonialism as robbery, savagery and greed. But the mainstay of the criticism again comprises the binaries between civilization/ savagery and light/ darkness.

Lord Jim is a novel whose characters and incidents were partly drawn from real people and events. It involves the story of Jim, who is haunted by the memory of a moment of lost nerve during a disastrous voyage, and submits to condemnation by a Court of Inquiry. He evades the civilized world and escapes to Patusan where he regains his lost heroism. What we have observed here is that, in the creation of his character, Jim, Conrad utilized his own experiences. He projected his repressed feelings in Jim's character. We have observed that Jim's jump from the *Patna* parallels Conrad's desertion of his native land, Poland. The main theme, betrayal has been observed to have come from Conrad's sense of guilt stemming from his quitting Poland. It has also been observed that the motifs of desertion, failing one's duty and shame are the central moral themes in Conrad's text and they are the reflections of

Conrad's own feelings. On the one hand, Jim's failure is of great importance in that Conrad subverts the image of the 'western seaman' and the codes of the British Merchant Marine, the ideas of fidelity, duty, responsibility, honesty and courage attached to the British culture. Conrad subverts the concept of the hero created by the British imperialism and recognized as the embodiment of many accomplishments in the exotic places far from the civilized parts of the world. Conrad, being aware of the dangers of personal imperialism, makes Jim fail in realizing his idea, and presents Jim's career of benevolent lawgiver and arbitrator at Patusan as a failure. On the other hand, Conrad prepares the just ground for Jim to prove his heroic worth on a moral scale in the Malayan colony as he bravely accepts death at the end without shirking away from his obligations. Conrad at once subverts the imperial idea of European heroism and revives it successfully in *Lord Jim*.

Nostramo is arguably Conrad's greatest and most complex novel. Conrad shows, in this novel, the social and political turmoil in South America in the vortex of new capitalism and skilfully relates it to the moment's imperial economic history. *Nostramo* is also a novel of profound psychological insight and of powerful political implications. It tells the story of a South American state whose silver mine serves both literally and metaphorically as the source of the country's "value", finance and politics. While writing *Nostramo* Conrad was aware of the policies of the world's great capitalist powers that aid the empire's sustenance, and his text, to some extent, was shaped by the pervasive capitalist ideologies of the time. Conrad's pessimistic world view persistent in *Nostramo* – a sense of history as futile and cyclical, of individuals as impenetrable and solitary, of human values as relativistic and irrational – has been observed to have been the result of both his individual psychology and the ideological pessimism in the period. In setting *Nostramo* in the historical context, we have observed that Conrad created characters representing the political views of the time. The characters in the novel are the epitomes of the general historical process – Mr. Gould is the representative of the British imperial idealism, Holroyd is a representative of America and its sheer capitalist agenda, Viola is a republican and Nostromo is the representative of a man entangled in issues serving various interests – political, financial and, finally, moral. Of course, Conrad did not employ these symbolic figures in his novel just for the sake of symbolism; rather, he ensures a

sense of vanity to all these ideas, making his characters fail miserably in their efforts to live up to them. All the characters in the novel are disillusioned by the idea that there is always a discrepancy between the ideal and the real, which comes out by man's obsession with 'the material interests'. As a sceptic, Conrad subverts each ideology represented by the characters. Through the disillusionment of Mr. Gould, who fails to perceive the real face of imperialism, Conrad subverts the idea of colonial adventurism and the British imperialism; through Sir John's, the American capitalist-imperialism; through Viola's, liberty and patriotism and through Nostromo's, the individual moral action. And yet, it is observed that, his scepticism remains complicit within capitalism's worldwide hegemonic discourse, as the attempts of revolution and self-determination are shown utterly futile at the end of the novel.

The Secret Agent and *Under Western Eyes* are the two most politically vocal novels of Conrad. In *The Secret Agent*, the surreptitious plot of exploding the Greenwich Observatory, a symbol of British Empire's highest position among nations of the world, is shown to have resulted in an inevitable failure and human tragedy. *Under Western Eyes* again underscores revolutionary activities by exposing them in almost a macabre way. The irony pervading the plot development and thematic consequences in *The Secret Agent* is explicit enough to indicate Conrad's final purpose of denouncing any attempt that may disturb the apparent notion of complacency in a capitalist nation sustaining on its exploits of the colonies. The irony gives way to a serious indictment founded on his personal disliking of things Russian in *Under Western Eyes*. Russia is symbolically replaced by the political credo of revolution and Conrad employs his essential Polish experience, engraved deep within him, to construct the Russian culture in the novel as his animus. It is observed in the reading of the novel that the Eastern European Culture of Russia is the 'other' to the mainstream discourse of empire upheld by the Western European nations. Attempt of political revolution is a resistance to the hegemony of the Western Europe's political supremacy, and hence their voices are hushed up in the caricatures of Russian Characters and in the forced aural incapacity of the protagonist, Razumov. Individual will, resulting in revolution, is always viewed with a sceptic eye by Conrad. Conrad is thoroughly quizzical about any method of qualitative change, commencing as a

method of erasure of the old empire-centric power of the state. The hegemony of power that he narrates in these two novels satisfies the conditions of his belief in the worth of evolution rather than in revolution in facilitating socio-political changes in a state. Thus he carefully portrays the anarchists in *The Secret Agent* and the revolutionaries in *Under Western Eyes* to demean their loyalty to the methods of resistance and revolutionary ideals and to degrade their ideological status. He makes Razumov the hero, who himself in reality, is a betrayer to their cause. The revolutionaries here ultimately become dislocated identities owing heavily to the unflinching alliance to their betrayer.

The hidden discursive nature of such typical representations, indeed, contributes to the discourse of inconclusiveness in Conrad's novels that composes the very tissue of the modernist culture. The ensuing manipulation of representations and images is thus turned into a means of domination. And yet, he is an unflinching critic of the imperial propaganda, at least at the outset, in texts like *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim*. But any attempt to examine this criticism of the imperial ideology by the author lands the reader virtually to assertions, with almost impossible yet innate polarities, from the very bitterest against Conrad to the most extolling. And that really is the crux of this postcolonial reading of the select novels of Joseph Conrad here. The evidence to classify him as a custodian or condemner of the imperial agenda, to count him as a champion or maligner of the cultures that he came across in his sea- life will turn out to be on all sides, forever nebulous and conflicting. It seems that the clue to this ideological ambiguity is inherent in the author's multi- exilic life that leaves him writing between culture and empire, without being frankly assertive of any one or the other.