



CHANGING PATTERN OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S SELECTED NOVELS IN MODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The implication here takes Conrad beyond life itself and strengthens his vision of the world as full of anarchy, terror, violence and treachery. Conrad saw these at work in almost all the spheres of life which impel one to think of the universal and eternal questions of the meaning of life. It would not be wrong to state that the crisis of the modern times of civilization has also the genesis in these facets of life. Seen from this angle, Conrad's works seem dynamic and prophetic.

Key Words: *Unhappy Experiences, Meaning & Purposeless Affair, Raw Material*

Introduction

For an artist, especially a writer, life with its experiences is the basic raw material of all art. All artists are, therefore, close to it as the novelist himself is. Conrad underwent some unhappy experiences at a stage in his life when these mould ones vision and are difficult to remove later from the mind. In his works Conrad almost recreated the same environment and made his characters react to it to derive a meaning of life as he would have done. He tells of Jims, MacWhirrs, Razumovs, Heysts and gentlemen Browns and Kurtzs in their individual social contexts. Also, the nature in its beauty and ugliness breathing with these characters to the extent of becoming harmoniously one reveals Conrad's quality as a novelist-artist. Conrad himself summed up in a letter to William Blackwood on June 5, 1902 that his work was an action observed, felt and interpreted with an absolute truth to his sensations and it was the basis of art in literature. It was, he stated further, an action of human beings who bleed to a prick, move in a visible worldⁱ. This quality of Conrad's works impelled Virginia Woolf to state in 1925 that it was *Youth, Lord Jim, Typhoon, The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* that would be re-read in their entirety. She stated, "one opens his pages and feels as Helen must have felt when she looked in her glass and realized that do what she would, she could never in any circumstances pass for a plain woman"ⁱⁱ.

Obviously, Conrad reveals in his novels some sordid truths of moral isolation, betrayal, evil, violence, deception and destructive illusions along with human solidarity and fidelity. He found that ideals and values in one's life are as akin to humanity as they are to solidarity though the evil forces tend to negate them. He, however, believed that solidarity and integrity are very essential to human existence and if one loses them, life becomes a meaningless and purposeless affair. It is this stage of conflict between these two truths of life that forms the nucleus of Conrad's works. He, in fact, records the price that his characters pay for having brains, conscience and imagination thereby creating a grand spectacle of the futility of life. No doubt, Conrad's works give a clear picture of the painful existence, the wail of humanity, tricks of chance and the fall of the innocent and the just. One can easily visualize in his novels what is and what should be. Nevertheless, the mystery of suffering still remains unrevealed.

In a way, Conrad renders men's struggle meaningful in relation to human ideals and values. His protagonists, while living true to thee ideals come face to face with their destiny either by a stroke of accident or

by an act of decision or by some error of temperament. When they are brought in this situation, they feel that it is now the test of their fundamental selfhood. The crisis that arises out of this confrontation, says M.D. Zebel, become, "... the test and opportunity of fundamental selfhood and there is no escape from it."ⁱⁱⁱ Conrad states of MacWhirr in **Typhoon** :

The sea... had never put itself out to startle the silent man, who seldom looked up, and wandered innocently over the waters with the only visible purpose of getting food, raiment, and house-room for three people ashore. Dirty weather he had known, of course. He had been made wet, uncomfortable, tired in the usual way, felt at the time and presently forgotten. So that upon the whole he had been justified in reporting fine weather at home. But he had never been given a glimpse of immeasurable strength and of immoderate wrath, the wrath that passes exhausted but never appeased—the wrath and fury of the passionate sea. He know it existed, as we know that crime and abominations exist; he had heard of it as a peaceable citizen in a town hears of battles, famines, and floods, and yet knows nothing of what these things mean—though, indeed, he may have been mixed up in a street row, have gone without his dinner once, or been soaked to the skin in a shower. Captain MacWhirr had sailed over the surface of the oceans as some men go skimming over the years of existence to sink gently into a placid grave. ignorant of life to the last, without ever having been made to see all it may contain of perfidy, of violence, and of terror. There are on sea and land such men thus fortunate or thus disdained by destiny or by the sea.^{iv}

Conrad's temperament was impulsive and it was basically a hereditary quality. His father Apollo wrote on October 31, 1865 when Conrad was nine years old, he, "... inherited his talents from his mother's family but on the practical side he is not to be envied because he takes after me."^v Conrads mother Eveline, Thaddeus wrote to young Conrad. "... was capable of soaring flights of intellect and heart and had a less easy going nature."^{vi} He described about his father many years later that he was, "a man of great sensibilities, of exalted and dreamy temperament; with a terrible gift of irony and of gloomy disposition; withal of strong religious feeling degenerating after the loss of his wife into mysticism touched with despair."^{vii} These qualities of both the father and the mother, perhaps, transformed into young Conrad a certain spiritual uneasiness and a tendency to constant worry. This was instrumental in making him depressed most of the times in his life.

Conrad was the only child of his parents. His father took part in the national uprising against the Russian rule and was exiled. As a child, Conrad had to suffer also a lot owing to the activities of his father. His father felt greatly concerned about his only son. He wrote to his cousin:

... he grows up as though in a monastic cell. For the **memento mori** we have the grave of our dear one and every letter which reaches us is the equivalent of a day of fasting a hair shirt or a discipline. We shiver with cold, we die of hunger.^{viii}

Conrad's mother had already died. His father was the only company for Conrad. Conrad saw his father also suffer much both in the jail and out of it. When his father died, it left a debilitating effect and revolt on the sensitive mind of Conrad. This effect was so severe at the time that Conrad described it in his **Life and Letters** as one which, "stripped off some of my simple trust in the government of the universe."^{ix}

At a young age Conrad was bereft of the affectionate and protective shadow of parental love. He grew up in a climate that had the tinge of depression and morbidity. Conrad wrote later referring to this period, "I suppose that in a futile childish way I would have gone crazy."^x Many years later when Conrad looked back on this period

of life he summed it up, "I don't know what would have become of me if I had not been a reading boy."^{xi} The time which Conrad passed by the side of his dying father deeply affected him and he could never forget it. He wrote of these days in 1915 when he had become a mature artist that he noticed and absorbed, "... that appalling feeling of inexorable fate, tangible, palpable... a figure of dread murmuring with iron lips the final words : Ruin—and Extinction."^{xii}

Conrad's father was a man of literary tastes. He wrote poetry which was not of a high rank but its appeal was of pessimism and frustration. Living in a melancholy atmosphere with his father, young Conrad found some sort of deviation in reading literature. He read Shakespeare and Hugo. He also used to read proofs of his father's translation of Hugo's **Travailleurs de la Mer**. It was a boring book but the portrait of Gilliat in isolation and in a hostile society attracted both father and son. It is quite possible that both of them might have seen their own fate in the characterization of Gilliat. Besides it, Conrad also became acquainted with the sea-stories of Fenimore Cooper, of Marryat, Mungo Park's *Travels in Africa*, James Bruce's **Travels** and David Livingstone's journeys to the Arctic. He might have also read the famous voyages of exploration like McClintock's *Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas*.

Thus, Conrad as a child, read history voyages, novels in Polish and French, Dickens and *Don Quixote* in abridged editions, he wrote in *A Personal Record*. He was, "... extremely sensitive, conceited, reserved and in addition, excitable."^{xiii} He was also endowed with a rich imagination. It is, therefore, quite possible that he reacted to the oppressive household atmosphere and might have found some sort of refuge into the imaginary world of the fictional heroes.

Son of Polish revolutionary, Joseph Conrad (1857-1925) possessed no knowledge of the English Language till he has twenty three. Moreover, though he inherited literary taste and sensibility from his father. Apollo N. Kerzeniowski, who possessed some poetic talent and was keenly interested in French and English literatures, he started his career as a navigator in exotic waters. It was towards the end of the nineteenth century that he took to writing and brought out *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* within a span of two years. He was encouraged by Edward Garnett to continue writing wholeheartedly; but he did not decide finally to abandon his career as mariner for quite some time. The sea life gave him a vast canvas to paint his own variegated experiences, and this indubitably makes his fiction unique. No wonder he has been unequivocally admired by almost all the scholars and critics of the English novel. For instance, Walter Allen points to his singular genius when he states that his "romantic career as a sailor in exotic waters easily blind us to the essential nature of Conrad's genius as a novelist and F. R. Leavis places him in the great tradition of the English Novel.

Like many great novelists, such as Charles Dickens, Henry James, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Raja Rao and others. *Joseph Conrad* is strikingly subjective and autobiographical. He enlivens his own characters. The frequent sufferings, pensive and sombre mood, noble spirit and morality, which he inherited from his parents and retained life-long in his nature as a bequeathed precious possession and which he lent to his characters, may be noticed unfailingly in his fiction. All the sea romances, which he has presented in his writings were breathed and tasted sip by sip by him; he had shared the difficulties, experiences and agonies of a mariner described in his fiction.

Conclusion

To illustrate the above assertion, let us cite a few examples from his works. *Heart of Darkness* is, as Jean-Aubrey rightly affirms, "a faithful transcript of most of the episodes of Conrad's own life during the later half of 1889. then, his *The Arrow of Gold* is out and out autobiographical. In this very novel, he refers to his life at Marseilles, A man named Dominic Cervoni, an officer of 'Saint Antoine', a ship on which Conrad was also a member of the crew, played a considerably significant part in Conrad's life. The novelist paints his personality in

The Arrow of Gold as much as he does in The Mirror of the Sea. The Cafe Bedoul, which Conrad used to visit during his sojourn in France, is described in Chapter I of *The Arrow of Gold*. Nostromo gives a brief view of Dominic, while Suspense, which is an unfinished novel, reflects the role played by Dominic in Conrad's Life. His feelings on passing the examination of third mate he records in Chance. His mouthpiece Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* is none other than he himself, and the lady who assisted him in getting a job was his own relative madam Podowaska. Captain Fresleven is really Freisleben who was killed in South Africa, and Conrad was appointed Captain in his place.

Though we find that almost all the reputed scholars of Conrad admit the reflection of his personal life in his fiction, yet there is a striking dearth of a comprehensive and full-length study of the autobiographical element in his fiction. Only J. Baines in his commendable book, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*, and E. W. Sain in his work entitled *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, throw some light on this significant aspect of his mind and art. Hence the need and justification for an exhaustive study of the personal note in his fiction, particularly when he makes the following very significant statement in this connection; "Every novel contains an element of autobiography and this can hardly be denied, since the creator can only express himself in his creation."

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