

CHAPTER TWO

JOSEPH CONRAD :

LIFE , WORKS AND CRITICISM

2.1 LIFE:-

Teodor Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski was born in the Ukraine in the South of Poland on 6th December, 1857. As Poland was partitioned between Russia, Austria and Prussia in those days, Conrad's birthplace was under Russian rule. That rule was oppressive, and as consequence, of an insurrection of the Poles.

As the leader of the insurrection was his own father, Apollo Naicez Korzeniowski, a Polish writer and nationalist, a politician and a journalist in patriotic action, Conrad's early years were much disturbed. When in 1862, his father was banished to Vologda by the Russian government, Conrad and his mother followed him into exile where they suffered much. In 1865, Conrad's mother died and his father sent him back to the Ukraine to stay with his maternal uncle where he remained for five years.

One immediate result of this sombre childhood was that he became a great reader. During his long, lonely and unoccupied hours, he turned to his father's library. At the age of five, he began reading of history, voyages and novels in Polish and French language.

In 1869, Conrad's father was freed. He carried off his son to Cracow where he died in 1870. Conrad was sent to the gymnasium of St. Anne, the foremost public school of the city. There he came under the

care of a tutor who influenced him profoundly. He was put forward by Conrad's relations to counteract his strange and inborn desire for a seafaring life. But after some earnest and futile talks, he realized that his efforts would be useless. Conrad's decision was, indeed, final. He left Poland on 14th September, 1874 for Marseilles when he was 16 years 9 months old.

The first phase of Conrad's seamanship was not profitable in any material sense. It was not exactly the best preparation for a career in the merchantile marine, but its value in the development of Conrad's personality is important. By joining the Mavis, which left Marseilles on 24th April, 1878, for Constantinople with a cargo of coal, Conrad avoided any immediate decision and began a fresh chapter in his life. The Mavis went on to the sea of Azov and came back to Lowestoft on 18th June 1878.

'Thus, after three years of adventurous life at Marseilles and in the West Indies, in his twenty-first year and hardly knowing a word of the language, Conrad first put his foot on English soil.'

[Life and Letters, i, 47]

Three weeks after landing at Lowestoft, he joined another ship called The Skimmer of the Seas. Reading English in the old standard, and speaking it with East Coast sailors, fishermen and shipwrights, he began his new apprenticeship. He read in translation Shakespeare, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and other English novelists who had gained European fame. Thus, he was drawn indirectly into the great tradition of English fiction.

Another voyage as an ordinary seaman, in the Europa, yielded unpleasant experiences and Conrad went back to London at the end of January, 1879, alone, ill and without money. During next six months, he passed his examination as third mate in the British Mercantile Marine.

Once an officer, Conrad threw himself unquestionably into the profession of the sea. M. Aubry's summary of the new phase does justice to its importance:

'After a childhood weighed down by oppression,
how excellent and moving it was to be free
from social conventions and political tyranny,
alone, and face to face with the wide spaces,
of the sea! The Sea might be an enemy, but
it was no ignoble one. This feeling, together
with a sense of the romance of a handful
of men, sternly commanded and united by
ties of simple loyalty, became the
inspiration of his work, an inspiration
strangely begotten by resolution out of despair.'

[Life and Letters, i, 60]

Although he gained a first-mate's certificate in 1883, and a master's certificate in 1885, most of the voyages after these dates were made in a lower rank than that for which he was qualified, because he could not

afford to wait long for a ship. The Otago was really Conrad's only command of importance.

The command promised him by the Brussels head quarters of the Belgian Congo trading company was withheld by the manager at Kinchasaa when Conrad arrived. He had to act as mate on the river-steamer Roi des Belges, and was only given temporary command when the captain fell ill. The unpleasant moral situation and the complete breakdown of his health caused him to resign his post and return to Europe, only four months after his arrival.

After this voyage, Conrad made only two more voyages, both to Australia, as first officer on a modern vessel; and finally, his health broke down. He also needed money to support himself. It was here that he began to write.

It was in 1894 that Conrad finally left the sea and settled in Essex, in the South of England. Then he moved to London where he developed close friendship with a number of eminent men of letters. In 1896 Conrad married Jessie George.

Marriage and the birth of sons in 1898 and 1906 necessarily meant more responsibility. It became increasingly urgent for him to make more money by his writing. Although by the turn of the century, he was well established as a writer, it was only with extreme difficulty that he could make both ends meet. He drove himself harder. From 1900 to the

outbreak of World War I, Conrad's life was almost entirely given over to his writing.

Although he had been ailing for some years, his death came suddenly, after a heart attack, on the morning of 3rd August 1924. He is buried in Canterbury, and the stone on his grave bears his full Polish name.

2.2 Works:-

In order to understand correctly Conrad's art and genius, it is essential to form an idea of some of the more important works of the novelist. Besides the translation of a play from the Polish, and the 12,000 words of an unfinished novel, The Sisters, which has not been published, the work of the second half of his life, roughly from 1894 to 1924, consists of thousands of letters (of which about 3,000 have been published); four volumes of essays, three plays, seven volumes of tales, and fifteen novels.

NOVELS

1. Almayer's Folly (1895)-

Conrad's first novel is Almayer's Folly. This "story of an Eastern River" is one of illusion, weariness and irresistible passion. Almayer is the only white trader of Sambir, an island in the Dutch East Indies up the river, Pantai. He has been there for many years first with much business and

under the protection of Captain Lingard, but latterly with nothing left to him but his love for his half-caste daughter Nina and his belief in a vast treasure waiting for him in the interior. After Captain Lingard's disappearance, hope has come to him in the form of Dain Maroola, a Malay of noble family. He dreams of the future when he and Nina will escape to Europe with the help of gold. But Nina flies with Dain across the sea to the house of his father. Almayer, weakly violent and affectionate by turns, sinks under the double blow of calamity and disappointment.

2. An Outcast of the Islands (1896)-

The story of this novel imitates that of Almayer's Folly. Some of the characters are the same, too, though the events take place before those in "Almayer's Folly. Peter Williams, the hero, has been entrusted by Lingard with the secret of the channel which gives access to his highly successful trading post. He is also passionately in love with a native girl, Aissa. During Lingard's absence, she allows Willems to marry her in return of his revelation to the Malaysians of the means of navigating the channel. After this, the Malay chiefs refuse to accept him into their society-Lingard is equally adamant, when he at last returns. Willems pleads with him to be taken away so that he can make yet another start somewhere else, but Lingard orders him to stay where he is. While attempting to escape, Willems is killed by Aissa.

3. The Nigger of the Narcissus (1898) –

This is Conrad's well known novel. It is the story of the sailing-ship Narcissus from Bombay to London. This is a story dealing with calms and storms, with mutiny on the high seas, with bravery and with cowardice, with tumultuous life, and with death, the releaser from toil. 'The Nigger of the Narcissus' is James Wait who is dying from consumption. His sinking life hangs like a mill-stone round the hearts of the sailors. Only Donkin feels in his dirty little soul no touch of compassion.

Though this novel has no plot in conventional sense, it is one of Conrad's most original conceptions.

4. Lord Jim (1900)-

It is a story of remorse and of the effort to regain self-respect for a deed of fatal and unexpected cowardice. The sea and secluded Eastern settlements are the background. Lord Jim, a young man of romantic imagination and an almost morbid sensibility, is an officer on the pilgrim-ship Patna. A moment of great trial come to him. He failed. For years he lived dully, never forgetting this failure. And then an opportunity came to him to retrieve, and he took it.

Lord Jim is a searching study of the cowardice of a man who was not coward. Conrad's descriptions are vivid and wonderfully true. Apart from this, Conrad gives us in "Lord Jim", the dramatic history of

an uncomprehended and tortured soul-the soul of a dreamer rising, under affliction, to ever higher flights of altruism and self-sacrifice.

5. Nostromo (1904)

Nostromo is the next important novel by Conrad. It deals with the cycle of life and death in the mythical republic of Costaguana, but it also summons almost every other theme encompassable in fiction. It is a full-scale account of politics, society, the historical process, geography, economics, morality, love, revenge, primitivism, civilization and imperialism.

6. The Secret Agent (1907)

It is a novel treating of the underworld of London life—the underworld of anarchists and spies. Mr. Verloc, “the secret agent”. Is ostensibly an anarchist, but in reality a spy of one of the big Embassies. Anarchism is certainly one of the two principal themes in this novel, the other being the domestic drama in which Verloc and his household are involved. The central incident, Verloc’s attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory by making use of his half-witted brother-in-law Stevie results in the unfortunate death of Stevie. This leads to Winnie’s murder of Verloc and consequently to her own suicide. The anarchist theme is thus essential to the whole novel.

7. Under Western Eyes (1911)

This novel ranks with the best works that Conrad produced. The story is told by an English Professor living at Geneva, partly in his own words and partly from a diary left by Razumov. Razumov, a young Russian student without any political bias gives information about Haldin, a murderer of Minister of state, to the authorities. But after that, he himself comes under suspicion of government. Caught, thus, in a web of suspicion, he consents to go to Geneva as a government spy where he falls in love with Haldin's sister. Under the awakening of his conscience, he confesses all and is punished by the people. The end of the book is tragic.

This book marks a step forward in Conrad's exactitude of style.

8. Chance (1913)

It is the most successful novel of Conrad and brought him immediate fame and recognition. The novel has a number of characters but it is concerned mainly with two characters, Flora de Barral, the daughter of a famous financier, and Captain Roderick Anthony, son of a poet and master of the ship Fernandale. The book is divided into two parts, named respectively "The Damsel" and "The Knight". The first concerns Flora de Barral's childhood

and her miserable youth, and the second concerns Captain Anthony and his life with Flora, aboard the Fernandale.

As its name suggests, the irony of chance is the leading link of the whole structure. The technique is highly complicated and difficult, and shows Conrad's power of control and organization of a vast material of life.

9. The Shadow Line (1915)

The story of this novel is told autobiographically. The central theme of the hero's first 'ill-starred command' is introduced by an account of a scheme to prevent him from obtaining it; it is concluded by his report of the voyage to the man who had helped him to gain the appointment. The tale is thus neatly framed within a prologue and epilogue. The Shadow Line is so handled that in it, everything is meant to throw light on the new Captain Giles' ordeal and its effect on him.

10. Victory (1915)

Victory is one of the simplest and most clearcut of Conrad's novels. It focuses exclusively upon one man, Axel Heyst and his moral dilemma. Heyst, yielding to his compassion for the unfortunate orchestra girl Lena, involves himself in the commitment to action which his temperament and philosophy had renounced.

When as a result the world intrudes upon his retreat at Samburan, in the persons of Jones, Ricardo and Pedro, he finds himself unequipped to cope with the forces they represent; and the novel's final dramatic and spiritual ironies are generated by this defect of moral responsibility. On symbolic level, it shows the victory of love represented by Lena over Heyst's theory of detachment.

11. The Arrow of Gold (1919):-

It is more autobiographical novel than any of his earlier novels-because of Conrad's involvement in a political movement. In this novel, Legitimist movement forms only the outer background, the inner circle is endowed with a different interest which Conrad under the mask of a character not only shares but makes quite revelatory of a secret hitherto suppressed crisis of his life in the past. The novel is autobiographical not in the physical sense but duly in a psychological sense.

12. The Rescue (1920):-

This novel was a return to the Malayan world of the first novels. It depicts the youthful Lingard who has allowed the course of his life to be altered by the claims of a native prince and princess whom he has befriended. His efforts for them fail because, when

the yacht of a wealthy English couple runs aground at the very scene of his activities, he falls in love with the yacht-owner's wife. But the working-out is too careful and leisurely. In Conrad's own words, it is 'slightly inflated' novel.

13. The Rover (1923):-

'The Rover' is Conrad's last completed novel. Peyrol, its hero, retires to end his days near the sea, quiet and unnoticed. Inevitably, however, he becomes part of his new community. He brings fresh hope to the village cripple and to simple Michel. Ultimately, he deliberately sacrifices his life for the twin causes of the French nation and of the young couple, Real and Arlette. In the book's last sentence, the country he served so well takes a noble leave of him.

14. Suspense (1925):-

Suspense was the novel Conrad was working on when he died. It deals with the period of Napoleon's exile in Elba. As it stands, it is portentously slow-moving far more so than The Rescue. It is a final illustration of artistic decline.

Short –story Collections

Besides novels, Conrad wrote short stories also which are collected in seven volumes. The first of these is Tales of Unrest (1898). There are five stories in this book- “Karain”, “The Idiots”, “An Outpost of Progress”, “The Return” and “The Lagoon”.

Youth (1902) comes next in order amongst Conrad’s volume of stories. There are three tales in this book-“Youth”, “Heart of Darkness” and “The End of the Tether”. In this volume, there is only one short story, “Youth” while the other two are novellas.

Typhoon(1902) is Conrad’s third volume of stories. It is made up of four tales – “Typhoon”, “Amy Foster”, “Falk” and “Tomorrow”. The first and longest of these is, as its name implies, “Typhoon”, the description of a storm- a typhoon in the China Seas.

A Set of Six (1908) is Conrad’s next collection of stories. As its name implies, it consists of six tales-“Gaspar Ruiz”, “The Informer”, “The Brute”, “An Anarchist”, “The Duel” and “Il Conde”.

Conrad’s next volume of stories Twixt Land and Sea (1912) contains three tales-“ A Smile of Fortune”, “The Secret Sharer”, “Freya of the Seven Islands”.

Within the Tides-Tales (1915) contains four tales- “The Planter of Malata”, “Because of the Dollars” , “The Partner”, “The Inn of the Two Witches”.