

Darkness as succour in *An Outpost of Progress*

Dr. SYED AFROZ ASHRAFI

Assistant Professor in English

Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Alkhirj

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract:

Joseph Conrad has been a hard hitting writer in the claustrophobic ambience of the 20th century fiction. The paper investigated the recurrent restlessness, the imagery of darkness as the redeeming impact of a sullen soul. The fiction of Conrad is basically a discourse on the imperial hegemony and the darkening images as its final aftermath. The story An Outpost of Progress confirms further the beaten milieu of an artist as somber as Conrad and as striking as his razor sharp, piercing claws on the myths generated by the white racism, An Outpost of Progress upholds the lonely image of the individuals recalling almost the doomed fantasies of Lucky and Pozzo.

Key words: Darkness, isolation, anguish, myths.

Joseph Conrad's position in English fiction today may be as firm and established as that of any other novelist, but to achieve this position, he went through a series of fluctuations. Not so much for his polish background as to the uncertain temper or even the boundless complex of his personality, he lived the life which bordered on the pangs of extreme isolation. The claustrophobic temperament, the germination of a feeling of the remorseless darkness constituted the forces that guided his rather volatile imagination into a creative whole that went far beyond the fetters of commonplace observations. When

applied to his art, it produces a grotesque picture of a tortured soul in exile. In the first place he is a political novelist but not like Disraeli for the writings of Conrad does not trace the genesis of a struggle going about Poland for independence and a hard fought nationalism. Conrad is political but the canvas or the perspective is much larger than scenes of the political movement in Poland because the African and the Russian references are overriding. It does not reduce him to the level of an individual belonging to a particular country whose currents and streams do not confine him into a limited perspective of vision.

Conrad's subjects are wide and varied as he does not fix himself into a formulated frame. He operated entirely on the basis of the experiences he gained while on the sea. There is one common fallacy with regard to Conrad that he was a sea novelist. This contention gains currency since he, for a long period of time had remained associated with the sea voyage. He does not write about it but the problems concerned with the people working at ship, their anguish, their despair emanating from the details of the practical problems confronting them. When he wrote about the sea and used it as a symbol for the chaos of the cosmos almost identical to its treatment is by the American novelists like Melville and Hemingway, with American's it is an explanation of the stark physical world, a place to escape the hard realities of life born out of a thickness of the social texture or tension but with Conrad the sea remains an optical illusion, one hard fact of life which is a problem not for the world around but for those only connected with it.

Conrad's major concern that formed the background of his art veered around colonialism and imperialism, the relations between Europe and Africa, the political turmoil in Latin America, Russia and the West and violence as the revolutionary weapon. These are the timely issues in which Conrad is quite adept but it is his understanding of the timeless matters which sustains his soaring reputation. He begins with the traditional question of good and evil, right and wrong and

responsible and irresponsible behavior. But in no time he develops a conviction that the familiar distributions among them are no longer verifiable and surely not even defensible. Conrad grounds his art securely in a passionate study of human nature with its endless capacity for self-deception and its endless indeed, desperate need for self-examination. His central figures are far more at home in their own company than in society.

They are unevenly intelligent; self-indulgent and self-absorbed to the point of solipsism and given to wide swings, even extremes of moods. They are abnormally susceptible to boredom and depression that typical modern disease of the spirit which finds its acknowledged expert in Conrad.

The two streams in Conrad's fiction is life at sea and the life on land representing. There are two major currents in his life. For him the sea is an illumination of the experiences of the wide world where the possibility of inertia and remorseless darkness are greater and more sordid while the life at land bears testimony to the objective world in which man fails without the required prudence and sophistication. Conrad having failed to unravel the mounting mysteries shrouding his erratic temperament, for he was a suffering writer flogging his imagination to keep it awake at the work bench. In both the world he studied and probed the split personality, searched for the hidden self. He studied the mechanism of guilt and redemption. Conrad is widely known as novelist of immense potentials, whose world was permeated by sophisticated pessimism. He is a writer whose art was anguished by the conglomerate of incidents of the personal perils and impersonal disasters, of the backwaters of despair and of the struggle within to come to terms with a hostile world outside. His own externality produced a rebellious mood at war with personal ideas and the order of the world and the synthesis between the two conflicting extremes remained an illusion he could never reconcile to. A novelist indeed who produced before the world such novels as *nigger of the narcissus*, *heart of darkness*,

Nostromo, the secret agent, under western eyes, all written with pain and anguish show how mature a writer he is, how measured and controlled his tone was. These are the attributes paid to Conrad as a novelist but there is one more dimension to his art, his short story telling which by any standards, is the best written at any point of time. His reputation as a short story writer may have been secondary to the imposing art of his novel but it cannot be eclipsed into the background as recreational or dashed off as a means to lull into inactivity of the so called lesser art. The background of his novels and short stories show no disparity, the thematic concerns too do not establish anything new regarding the subjects and issues or even the general atmosphere surrounding his art. Only the canvas is different but the philosophy is equally murky and the backdrop equally black. There is too much of political and psychological strain and too much of moaning and whining and as such his short stories cannot be seen in isolation from his novels. His novels are a wide world of anguish in action. His stories are a microcosm in despair. There is no bright spot in between.

Virginia Woolf writes

Virginia Woolf published the essay Joseph Conrad, a tribute to the recently deceased writer, in the Times Literary Supplement in August 1924. Beginning and ending the essay with moments of sincere eulogy, and famously comparing Conrad's style to Helen of Troy, Woolf nevertheless rehashes her earlier critiques of Conrad's literary style, which she deems ill equipped to represent the complexities of modernity.

How adept a practitioner of short story Conrad is, could be gauged from the fact that he wrote as many as nineteen stories which in totality constitute the basis for his novels. The art of short story is more demanding and delicate since short story is rarely a development, it is always a culmination. Most of the stories of Conrad defy the prescription of brevity at any cost. Conrad is believed to have devoted twenty year (1896-16) to the

experimental forms of story. The form of short story assumed new complexity and threw more subtle constructive methods to the presentation of this art. Conrad's stories have discovered much to the delight of the form in question, a certain approach which broadens the scope and ridicules the traditional definition that a short story must have a singleness of effect. Conrad in his stories appears to be free from any strain as to the technique of the short story. He went about writing stories which are short, long and even too longish would proceed to call in question the basic structure, the traditional stories that E.A.Poe, Maupassant, Katherine Mansfield and O.Henry had created. His stories like *Karain*, *An out Post of Progress*, *The Lagoon*, *The Anarchist*, foster long stories in length and breadth and Conrad does not appear too concerned about the totality of impression which according to E.A.Poe was the hallmark of a genuinely good short story. Conrad has not only redefined but also modified the entire structure of short story rendering it more open and flexible to receive the wide variety of impressions. The merciless vividness of detail and the long drawn-out fully developed passages are his gift to the art of short story. It is indeed important to note that Conrad's stories are not loosely constructed or structured. There is one thread running through the entire plot which binds together the conflicting images into a coherent whole. The coherence is never a casualty for Conrad is alive to the major demands of this art form which we would, examine in our discussion of "*An out post of progress*", which should reveal the kind and level of maturity he has achieved and how he fashioned a body of work that is singularly rich not only in the abundance of its individual achievements but in its conspicuous versatility.

She writes again

She concludes that the early novels, "with their air of telling us something very old and perfectly true," will be the ones to endure: Woolf consigns their truth, however, to memory and the past.

An Out Post of Progress: “An Out Post of Progress” is an imaginative marvel of Conrad’s artistic skill set against the background of Africa with sordid images of darkness and stunning inactivity. It is not just a revelation of Conrad’s sustained association with the remorseless darkness. His imagination turns black and fiery as the story begins with the description of two white men as kayerts and Cartier as the new in charge of the trading station. These two individuals though are very dissimilar in appearance and set apart though their habits remain the focus of attention throughout the story. Both are weak individuals with dark vision of life engaged in the profession of survival taking on each other in moments of ecstasy and dullness. Conrad has cast them as two wires gone haywire by the circumstantial oddities. They move and wander lolloping at times drifting into nothingness and the sense of nothingness being their forte. They seem like a pair of frogs tied together not allowed looking beyond their immediate predicament. Conrad has made them move against the lingering shadows of gloom and he grapples with a situation which in all probability is reflection of his own fallen universe. The life at land, a disillusioning experience for Conrad finds fuller expression and the sense of impending evils reaches the creator when one of the two individuals loses his tryst with destiny.

“An Out Post of Progress” is a sustained and rigorous explanation of the drab monotony of life and the absurdity of all human efforts. The two individual’s kayerts and certier are the symbolic representations of the halo around progress, a vision raised by the civilization. Conrad mocks and ridicules the much vaunted progress which is neither the progress of soul nor materialism, though this materialism is the base upon which the promise of progress is sustained, a point Conrad raises through kayert. Progress was calling to kayerts from the river. Progress and civilization and all the virtues. Society was calling to its accomplished child to come, to be taken care of, to be instantiated, to be judged, to be condemned. Conrad’s dig at

both the advancing civilization becomes very apparent as there is a perceptible anguish against the society which is a byproduct of civilization. The accomplished child is a reference to the sophisticated ways of the world. In fact this point of indignation assumes significance in the context of Conradian universe replete with negations and ripples of excitement towards the beginning of the story is all adrift and plunges into the unassailable depths of despair typical of his treatment of a subject. The violence of the emotions he had passed through produced a feeling of exhausted fatigue. He had plumbed in one that after the unsuitable depths of horror and despair and found repose in the conviction that life had no more secrets for him neither had death so.

Kayerts and Carlier walked arm in arm, drawing close to one another as children do in the dark; and they had the same, not altogether unpleasant, sense of danger which one half suspects to be imaginary. They chatted persistently in familiar tones. "Our station is prettily situated," said one. The other assented with enthusiasm, enlarging volubly on the beauties of the situation. Then they passed near the grave. "Poor devil!" said Kayerts. "He died of fever, didn't he?" muttered Carlier, stopping short. "Why," retorted Kayerts, with indignation. Carlier, entering into the spirit of the thing, made a military salute and answered in a brisk tone,"

This is a post death situation when Kayerts having been dead now is totally shattered. The death of Cartier renders him phlegmatic and stoical references are too obvious. Lost and pulverized he stood having discovered the absurdity of all human actions and even death holds no terror for him. This is an incident where the extreme banality of life as fallout of the farcical progress that leaves in Kayerts no sense of romance, no love for life either for life had revealed its secret and death never abounds in any mystery. Conrad in the portraiture of Kayerts and Carlier has again pressed his message home. The dark side of the world, the merciless details, vivid explanations and submission for the battered psyche all has combined well to

be his typical tales. The glimmer of hope in Conradian art is a wild goose chase. Even the complexes abounding Conrad's life have hammered him to the extent that anything which is bright Conrad, as a matter of principle has to write off. The grief ridden world of Conrad, the living and somber perceptions related to the realism holds away a Conradian imagination. He is a captive to the imposing negation of his personality.

He had found one of them! And even he, the man of varied and startling experience, was somewhat discomposed by the manner of this finding. He stood and fumbled in his pockets (for a knife) while he faced Kayerts, who was hanging by a leather strap from the cross. He had evidently climbed the grave, which was high and narrow, and after tying the end of the strap to the arm, had swung himself off. His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director.

“An Out Post of Progress” is a fabulous tale told by an erratic mind whose obsessive concern with the stark and wild physical world adds a new dimension of complexity to the oeuvre of his art. Conrad is indeed an adept practitioner of storytelling completely aware of its delicacies and limitations. The story is longish but a culmination. The aspect of details has been sacrificed but what still remains the focus of all attention is the concentration on the singleness of effect achieved through coherence in thought and description. The art of short story is elevated as some of the basic principles have been dealt with absolute control and amazing precision which exhibits total adherence to the demands of the art form. This genre itself received a fillip at the hands of Joseph Conrad.

Night came, and Kayerts sat unmoving on his chair. He sat quiet as if he had taken a dose of opium. The violence of the emotions he had passed through produced a feeling of exhausted serenity. He had plumbed in one short afternoon

the depths of horror and despair, and now found repose in the conviction that life had no more secrets for him: neither had death.

Darkness as the image of salvation or redemption creeps in as the lonely voice of an individual reflects the existentialist anguish of a staggering soul short on buoyancy and high on the zeal to see the macabre as the succour of life. Darkness permeates Conrad's consciousness as the final resolution of an artist who knew the perils of existence, the racism of the imperialists and the drama of civilization as the only devil in the progress of human soul.

REFERENCES

1. Phillips, Caryl; and Chinua Achebe. "Was Joseph Conrad really a racist?" The famous African novelist contends that he was, in this interview. *Philosophia Africana* March 2007 [removed]. "Out of Africa," article by Caryl Phillips in *The Guardian* about the interview, 21 Feb. 2003.
2. Cole, Sarah. "Dynamite Violence and Literary Culture." *Modernism/modernity* 16, 2 (April 2009) [extract, muse].
3. Moore, Gene M. "Slavery and Racism in Joseph Conrad's Eastern World." *Journal of Modern Literature* 30, 4 (Summer 2007) [first half only].
4. Wheatley, Alison E. "'A World of Their Own': Subversion of gender expectations in Conrad's plays" [Conrad as a playwright]. *Papers on Language and Literature* Winter 2001.