Joseph Conrad: Defender or Condemner of Imperialism?

Abdullatif Al-Khaiat

Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Philadelphia University, Amman, Jordan

Received on October 11, 2009
Accepted on June 09, 2010

Abstract

Joseph Conrad’s attitudes to imperialism and races have been the object of an ever increasing flow of writings. It has been so hard to give him his due and to utter the final verdict concerning his real attitude as regards imperialism and races. His own fiction has provided evidence for both admirers and vilifiers. Although Conrad himself declared that he was content to ‘sympathize with common mortals’, no matter where they lived, this claim has been far from convincing to many critics. Many have seen him as accepting blindly the arrogant attitude of the white as put forth by Victorian sociologists and anthropologist; many, on the other hand, have defended him vehemently. But, as this paper argues, there are inherent factors in Conrad’s fiction and, most likely, in his character, that preclude the reaching of any final judgment on that head. The inconclusiveness is something essential to Conrad’s intellect, and that is reflected in his fiction. Indeed one of the two focal points in the paper is that this feature of ambivalence is more pronounced in Conrad’s fiction than either of the two extreme readings of his fiction. The other focal point is that though his life experiences can go some way towards explaining his ambivalent stance, the enigma is in Conrad’s very mind, because it seems to be a deliberate choice of his to be inconclusive.

Keywords: Defender, Condemner, Imperialism, Victorian, Inconclusiveness, Ambivalence.

1. Introduction

Why does Conrad’s stance concerning races and imperialism seem impossible to settle down once and for all? Why has it been so hard to give him his due as regards his moral position and to finally turn to other things? Why has his ambivalence as modernist and pro-imperialist been so hard to sort out? The answer, as this paper will contend, appears to be that there are factors in Conrad’s life and character that will not go away, and that those factors make it impossible to give the last word about him, or to issue the verdict concerning him. The inconclusiveness appears also to be, at least partially, deliberate on Conrad’s part. It will be shown to be, again partially, accountable for by the special circumstances of his life; partially because his life experiences will never be sufficient to explain the elusiveness of his stance; we may never get to fathom the ultimate sources of his inconclusiveness because, as Conrad himself once said, ‘We live as we dream alone.’
Conrad himself defended, in the Author’s Note to his novel *Almayer’s Folly*, his choice of setting his tales in far-off regions, on the grounds that “there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away .. I am content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live.” (viii)

But how convincing is his sympathy ‘with common mortals?’ For answer to this question you can find virtually any assertion, from the very bitterest against Conrad to the most extolling. There is certainly no voice that has been compelling enough to show finally that Conrad is one thing or the other, not even Achebe’s authoritative voice. And that really is the crux of the point here. No one will ever find in Conrad enough evidence to classify him as a defender or condemner of colonialism, to count him as a glorifier or vilifier of the whites. The evidence will turn out to be on all sides, forever nebulous and conflicting. That is so because the conflict is inherent in Conrad’s character and in the multi-exilic life he led. That he was forced to leave his native land is not so unusual, but he seems never to have reconciled himself to his new home. It will be seen near the end that he recorded that too in his literature. But it is equally telling that he avoided setting any of his major works in Eastern Europe, and especially in his native land Poland – it is quite natural to find in that a trauma that will not heal. Be that as it may, that both his critics and defenders can find all the amount of evidence they like to find in his fiction is a certainty.

The plan will be here to go through a handful of disparaging statements, either defending or admiring ones, then to demonstrate the bewildering evidence in his fiction, and finally to make some conclusions.

2. Condemners

One of the loudest voices in condemning Conrad for failing to condemn imperialism is of course that of Chinua Achebe. What offended the renowned novelist was not a stray statement or any particular notion, but almost every syllable of *The Heart of Darkness*. Contrasting Conrad’s depiction of a European woman and his depiction of an African woman, Achebe finds in that, “the bestowal of human expression to the one and withholding of it from the other.” (Achebe 1999, 122). On one of the two occasions when Africans are given the power of speech, one of them declares that if he were given the body of a white man, he and his comrades would “Eat ‘im!” This is for Achebe a deliberate destruction on Conrad’s part of anything noble to be expected from an African, to find nothing that is not beastial and horrible. “What really worries Conrad is the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry, [of the European with the African]” (p.120). Nor can Conrad get away with it by having a primary narrator and a second narrator, because, as Achebe says, “Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence.” (p.123). Even when most pathetic pictures are painted of the criminal treatment of Africans, it is for Achebe an attempt on Marlow’s, and hence Conrad’s, part “to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments,” (p.123). A sentence that particularly offends the illustrious writer is “.. the thought of their humanity – like yours … Ugly.” (p.124)² And his conclusion is “that Conrad was a bloody racist.” (p.124) He dismisses curtly the claim that “Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the European in the story than he is to the natives.” (p.124) His rejection of this apology for Conrad is based on the ground that Africa for
Conrad is just a backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor, “a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the European enters at his own peril.” (p.124) He denies Conrad the status not only of a great artist, but a mere artist (p.125).

Quite far has Achebe gone. But not enough for Edward Said (1993), who asserts that Chinua Achebe does not go far enough in emphasizing what in Conrad’s early fiction becomes more pronounced and explicit in the late works, like Nostromo and Victory. Conrad treats [the local Indians and the ruling-class Spaniards in Nostromo] with something of the same pitying contempt and exoticism he reserves for African Blacks and South East Asian peasants. (pp. 165-166)

Said is even more drastic in depreciating Conrad’s racism when he says of his and Flaubert’s work that it is, “despite its ‘realism’, ideological and repressive: it effectively silences the Other, it reconstitutes difference as identity, it rules over and represents domains figured by occupying powers, not by inactive inhabitants.” (p.201)

Said of course assaults Conrad not as an individual, but as one of a huge number of biased and racist writers of fiction and non fiction. But we need not go into that here.

To many, it appears that Conrad does not merit the place awarded him in the canon of the English and world novel. Mukhtar Chaudhary (2003), for instance, has this to say:

Joseph Conrad’s position as a great writer is questionable. The reason is that racial details found in his work, and often ignored or shrugged off by [many] commentators, make him look like a partisan spirit instead of an objective observer of human situation...The human hierarchy in Conrad is, in descending order in value and worth, the British, the Continental European, and the rest. (p.41)

Chaudhary rather depreciates the practice of those who hold Conrad as a great artist:

They will see that Conrad does not treat ‘race’ and ‘colonialism’ as local colors or as a detail in his setting, but as part of the universal meaning that great literature is supposed to communicate. He is so conscious of this detail of human experience that he is unable to transcend it even when he is aiming at presenting a moral or ethical issue having universal relevance across geographical or racial lines. (p.42)

Naturally, it is Heart of Darkness that has attracted the most comments and analyses in this connection. It seems that this amazing novella has attracted condemnation and extolling in proportion to its great popularity in all languages and parts of the world. Both friends and foes of Conrad find this little work to invite their attention the most. About this novella, many scholars adopt rather the same viewpoints of Achebe’s, finding Conrad guilty of placing the Africans at a lower level morally and humanly than the Europeans. James M. Johnson, for instance, deplores Conrad’s painting of Africa as inherently evil. In his words: “His version of evil – the form taken by Kurtz’s Satanic behavior – is ‘going native.’ In short, evil is African in Conrad’s story; if it is also European,
that’s because some number of white men in the heart of darkness behave like Africans. (pp. 370-371)

He failed miserably according to Johnson because “Conrad’s use of Africa in “Heart of Darkness” (1899) reinforces the dominant racial paradigm enunciated by Spencer in Principles of Sociology – and by Victorian anthropology generally.” (p.112)

But why is the world unlikely to be imagined without the white man taking it upon himself to look after it, to order it as he wills? Can there be an Africa, Asia or South America, wonders Edward Said (1993), without the imperialist?

Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end. But come to an end it would. (p.28)

It is not that Conrad tries to exonerate himself, according to Patrick Brantlinger. “Conrad must have recognized his own complicity and seen himself as at least potentially a Kurtz-like figure. In the novella, the African wilderness serves as a mirror, in whose ‘darkness’ Conrad/Marlow sees a death-pale self-image.” (p.377)

Brantlinger (1985) does not let Conrad get away with it by his just portraying a morally corrupt West.

The difficulty with this ingenious inversion, through which ‘ideals’ become ‘idols,’ is that Conrad portrays the moral bankruptcy of imperialism by showing European motives and actions to be no better than African fetishism and savagery. He paints Kurtz and Africa with the same tarbrush. His version of evil – the form taken by Kurtz’s Satanic behavior – is ‘going native.’ In short, evil is African in Conrad’s story; if it is Also European, that’s because some number of white men in the heart of darkness behave like Africans…while Conrad/Marlow treat the attribution of ‘evil’ to the European invaders as a paradox, its attribution to Africans he treats as a given. (pp. 371-372)

The general trend of most condemners is that Conrad failed to go beyond the Victorian racially superior attitude, that his fiction reinforces the dominant racial paradigm, which was enunciated by the current anthropology and sociology, and never challenged by Conrad.

Nor is the verdict better about Conrad’s other fiction than Heart of Darkness, as we saw in Said’s verdict, and as Robert Ducharme (1993) tells us: “I think it can be demonstrated that his novel Lord Jim contains what may fairly be called a defense of traditional Western cultural values and practices.” (p.4)

3. Defenders:

Scholars angry with Conrad can be Western or from the Third World, and so can defenders. Many can see him as even-minded, fair, and having a sympathetic attitude to all races and nations.

It is revealing to see how differently one can read the same Heart of Darkness from the perspective of the indignant scholars mentioned so far by quoting from a Third-World Scholar, D. C.
A. Goonetilleke (1991), a professor from Sri Lanka, who thinks that Conrad has a sense of racial equality and a balanced critical sense (p.16). He adds somewhere else:

Writing in the heyday of Empire, the age of Joseph Chamberlain and Cecil Rhodes, Conrad subverts majority imperialist sentiments and opinion from the beginning, revealing an aspect of his modernity. Suggestions of darkness in Britain’s past and present history are confirmed by Marlow’s opening words, ‘And this has also been one of the dark places of the earth.’ (p.69)

The same good Sri Lankan says about another novel, Almayer’s Folly: “Racial superiority is refused. Conrad’s criticism of Lingard’s sense of white racial superiority is implied in the excess of Lingard’s consciousness of his adopted daughter’s colour and in his defensiveness.” (p.16)

If anything, it seems to Goonetilleke that it is the non-whites who are favoured by Conrad: “The naturalness and reality of the Africans differ strikingly from the alienness and frightening absurdity of the [French] man-of-war” (p.72)

That Conrad attains balance is corroborated by Brian Spittles (1992): “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.” (p.17)

In most cases, scholars who condemn Conrad’s stance concerning imperialism do so concerning races; and, in the same way, those who defend his attitude to one defend his attitude to the other. So when Benita Parry champions his attack on imperialism in the following text, it is almost sure that that subsumes his attitude to races:

by revealing the disjunction between high-sounding rhetoric and sordid ambitions and indicating the purposes and goals of a civilisation dedicated to global ... hegemony, Conrad's writings [are] more destructive of imperialism's ideological premises than [are] the polemics of his contemporary opponents of empire." (Quoted in Brantlinger 1985, 365)

Along the same lines Ian Watt says that Heart of Darkness is “an early expression of what was to become a worldwide revulsion from the horrors of Leopold’s exploitation of the Congo.” (p.130). (Ian Watt is not to be confused with Cecil Watts, about whom Brantlinger says (p.364): “Watts is one of the many critics who interpret Heart of Darkness as an exposé of imperialist rapacity and violence.”)

To admirers, Conrad appears to merit applause on his exposing the imperial West on at least two scores. He first shows that the horror of the situations as generated by European intervention suggests the colonial mission not to be a period of bringing light to benighted savages as it is itself a process of darkening, thus perverting the West's image of itself as bearer of light and civilization. Then, secondly, locating the cause of the horror in the African wilderness would appear a fairly clear repetition of Africa as the hideous primal cause.

It is of course not Africa or Asia, but the West and the Rest, a quite deep-rooted complex, not yet uprooted one suspects. But to Goonetilleke, Conrad appears to be able to see an individual from the Third World as more than an inferior Other: “I agree with Kettle,” he says, “when he states
that ‘Dain Waris in *Lord Jim*, Hassim in *The Rescue*, are presented with the greatest simplicity and dignity; indeed they are among Conrad’s few characters (apart from women) who can be said to be idealized.” (pp.52-53) But as it will be seen a little below, there is no doubt to even most admirers who is the unquestionable master in Conrad.

There are of course all kinds of conclusions here, but when all is said, it remains a fact that there were very few works of British fiction writers before World War I critical of imperialism, and hundreds of supporters of it. Conrad was among the very few who did criticize, and this at least is to his credit.

No wonder then that one finds as many champions of Conrad on that score as condemners. Many of both camps are listed by Tom Henthorne (2000). He calls the Western attitude to other nations as ‘rotten’ (p.204). He especially quotes McClure, who finds that “Conrad rejects the superiority of Western society, (p.204); McClure interprets the ending of *Lord Jim* as an indictment of imperialism’s destructiveness (p.204). To both McClure and Eloise Knapp, Conrad is anti-racist and anti-imperialist, but to Henthorne, Third-World nations deserve more: Natives are not only capable of independence, but their revolution is inevitable. He challenges Achebe’s great misreading of Conrad, because the overturn is definitely coming in those regions. Henthorne foresees an alternative frame of reference, a time when imperialism ends. *Heart of Darkness* according to him suggests that such consciousness will emerge, and that “the people of Africa will eventually strike back.” (p.205)

Henthorne goes so far as to find “revolution in virtually all of [Conrad’s] colonial fiction,” (p.205). He goes farther than most when he states that “In *Lord Jim*, as in all of his early, colonial fiction,” Conrad develops alternative perspectives of imperialism through non-European characters in order to expose the inherent contradictions of the imperialist system and the inevitability of its end. Such a focus was, of course, unusual in the 1890s, prompting one contemporary reviewer of *Lord Jim* to remark that “Conrad, beyond all others, has identified himself with the standpoint of the natives, has interpreted their aspirations, illuminated their motives, and translated into glowing words the strange glamour of their landscape.” (p.206) To Henthorne the white man cuts a figure most unfavourable to the West: “As in much of [his] colonial fiction, Conrad uses white protagonists to challenge European assumptions of racial superiority.” (p.207)

A very different reading we have here of Jim’s and Kurtz’s characters. We have a bursting of the myth of the white man as a supernatural power. “Ultimately,” Henthorne says, “Conrad debunks this myth as he did in *Heart of Darkness*. As Eloise Hay suggests .. Kurtz is perceived by the Africans not as a god, but as a man backed by “overwhelming force.” (p.207) The white imperialist will argue of course that he is there to civilize, but that becomes absolutely ludicrous because, for instance, “the fact that Kurtz professes the desire of ‘humanizing, improving, instructing’ his subjects even as he corrupts them makes the attack upon European imperialism all the same devastating.” (p.207)
The image of the white is not much better in Conrad’s other colonial fiction. In *Lord Jim*, for instance, “The cowardliness of Jim and the other white officers is all the more damaging to the colonial system because it stands in sharp contrast to the actions of the Malay helmsmen who ‘remained holding the wheel’ during the crisis (LJ, 61; Henthorne 2000, 208)

The existence of the Other in Conrad is even more forcefully enunciated by Brian Spittles (1992):

For Conrad the Far East, South America, Central Africa were not peripheral areas; they too were the core of human experience. Events and experiences there were not of merely secondary interest as measured against the centrality of European culture… 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. (p.17)

To such researchers as Spittles and Henthorne, Conrad’s claim, quoted at the beginning of this paper, that he was ‘content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live’ would sound quite justified.

Conrad’s own summation of imperialism in Africa, based on personal experience, was that it was, as he declared in his *Last Essays*, ‘the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience’ (p.17). But indeed, if we were to accept this at its face value, then why all that endless influx of arguments and counter-arguments!

4. Both Sides in his Stories:

How earnest Conrad’s effort to do justice to various nations and groups was will never be finally determined. Many do accept that he tried his best to be balanced and fair, nay, to be, as some have asserted, maybe biased in favour of the non-white. To Achebe and like-minded scholars, Conrad was a thorough racist. And as will be seen in the following paragraphs, his novels and tales provide ample evidence to both. In large part, it depends how you wish to read him. In sheer number, the whites in Conrad’s work who are a disgrace to their race and nations are more perhaps than non-western whites who are so. A cursory contrast of the English Donkin and the black Wait in “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ ” would show who of the two is the more impressive, superior and capable. We have the negro as “calm, cool, towering, superb … naturally scornful, unaffectedly condescending.” (p.18), while the white English Donkin is less respected by everyone; he is cowardly, cheeky and abject, (p.86); it is of no use for him to brag , ‘I am an Englishman’, (p.12). Even the rather imbecile Finn does not defer to him (p.13). The sailors can jeer at Donkin, (p.96), not at Jimmy. While the nigger of the title, Jimmy, can subjugate the sailors like the worst tyrant. (pp.36-37), Donkin, after stirring some trouble, is tamed for good by the first mate of the ship (p.40).

Scholars who view Conrad favourably can quote an abundance of evidence like the above. ‘Gentleman’ Brown (of *Lord Jim*) is described by Goonetilleke in the following words: ‘Brown is a black parody of a gentleman, like Mr. Jones in *Victory.*’ (p.35)
In *Almayer's Folly*, Almayer does not of course fare better than Donkin; he raises nothing more than contempt in the minds of all, his wife, his daughter, and perhaps the reader. His Malay wife berates her daughter for behaving like a white: "You speak like a fool of a white woman." (149) And Nina herself prefers to think of herself not as among the whites, despite her white father: "I hate the sight of your white faces. I hate the sound of your gentle voices." (p.40)

But nowhere perhaps is the white man exposed more fully than in Conrad's short story "An Outpost of Progress". The two white men who figure in that story are the most inept and clumsy of creatures, and very low on morality as well. It is the native, Makola, who does all the work, while they collect the percentage from their company. They just idle about and talk. Here is a sample of their conversation:

Carlier said one evening, waving his hand about, "in a hundred years, there will be perhaps a town here. Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and – and – billiard-rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue – and all. And then, chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilized men to live in this very spot!" (p.95)

Characteristically, the two white harbingers of civilization later quarrel over some sugar, one kills the other, and then hangs himself.

Nor do the officers of the Patna in *Lord Jim* fare better than the two men of "An Outpost of Progress", when they jump (including Jim) for their personal safety, leaving to their fate eight hundred passengers, while it is the humble Lascar helmsman who adheres to his duty.

*Lord Jim* and Conrad's other imperial fiction came just before a major shift in perspective was about to take place. In *Lord Jim*, as Christopher GoGwilt (1995) tells us, one comes across “an uncertainty of cultural contexts which began to eclipse the self-assured English claim to lordship (of one kind or another) overseas. In that uncertainty we might also recognize a growing awareness of cultural differences which began to unsettle the nineteenth century’s consolidation of European imperial and colonial assumptions. (p.47)

Conrad was just ahead of his time in perceiving that imperialism was something of the past, that it was no more than greedy scramble for the wealth of the world. It is just as GoGwilt says about the Patna inquiry in *Lord Jim*: "The whole of the Patna inquiry might be read as the progressive revelation of the underlying material interests of an international capitalist imperialist."(p.51)

It might be supposed that the inflated ego of the white man would have collapsed under its own weight had it not been aided by the impression he often created on the minds of the native. Thomas Pakenham (1993) tells us as much in *The Scramble for Africa* about Arthur Hodister, one main model of *Heart of Darkness*’s Kurtz: "For the last ten years Arthur Hodister's charismatic reputation had spread from the heart of darkness to the heart of Brussels....To the simple Africans, his white skin and neat black beard gave him the air of a god." (p.434)
Though it is for ever deplorable that a race finds itself to be superior to another, or to all others, it is unfortunate that, as Goonetilleke notes, not only the white, but even the colonized coloured admitted the former’s superiority. There are coloured people who believe in white superiority because of their psychological backwardness and subordinate position. (p.10) For a concrete example, Goonetilleke refers to Dain Waris in *Lord Jim*. He is, “content to accept unquestioningly Jim’s foreign overlordship as if it were the natural order of things; the other members of his community hold Jim in even greater awe.” (pp.49-50)

This *Lord Jim’s* Dain Waris is admired by his people and is intended, as it seems, to be admired by the reader, *in so far as he resembles the Western model*. He is, as Brantlinger points out only an intermediate type between the oriental and the westerner. Some of his qualities are akin to the white’s and therefore he deserves admiration. Let it be noted however that the inferior position is recognized by all, and by him: when for instance gentleman Brown and his men raid the island in the absence of the white Jim, Dain Waris does not dare to take the obvious step of forcing them away or attacking them. It is not far-fetched to say that many regarded Jim as virtually a deity, while they considered Dain Waris, no matter how admirable, as a mere mortal. He waits instead for the master, for Jim. They all wait for Jim who, on arrival, changes the whole situation. (p.330) Although this latter does not prove himself eventually to deserve the trust put in him.

Similarly, in *Nostromo*’s state of Costaguana, it is evidently by adopting European ideas that Decoud is seen to have the width of outlook and detachment which permit him (p.136) to identify a practical means of ensuring the survival of Sulaco and the Blancos (i.e. the whites). – separating Sulaco from the helpless rest of Constguana.

You do come everywhere across good, clever or efficient individuals from the Third World, like for instance Mohammad Bonso and Emma, his sister and Stein’s wife, in *Lord Jim* (pp.206-208). They are admirable in their way, but never equal to the masterly white.

One can of course say that Conrad was extremely pessimistic about the future of the Third World; even when they tried to be independent, they ultimately relied on the colonizer. Hence Goonetilleke has this to say on that:

Through Mrs. Gould, Conrad points to the social change brought about by imperialism. He also conveys an irony beyond her consciousness through Montero’s toast – that the social change is a byproduct of exploitation ...Nostromo, then, is significant in dramatising a Third-World phenomenon, economic imperialism. (p.137)

Even the admiring Goonetilleke can say that although “Marlow trenchantly criticizes ‘the conquest of the earth,’ [he] still ... finds justification for British imperialism .. its ‘efficiency and its idea’ " (p.66)

Conrad would say of course, as we saw in the Author’s Note to *Almayer’s Folly*, that he was trying his best to let each side, white and non-white, have their say. Thus Almayer says to his daughter Nina. " ...he [Dain] is a savage. Between him and you there is a barrier that nothing can remove." But she retorts: “I am not of your race. Between your people and me there is also a
barrier that nothing can remove.” (p.179) And yet, no one who witnesses the scuffle between Almayer and Dain will have a doubt who is the clumsy loser and who is the capable winner: After Dain has wrenched the revolver from Almayer's hand and thrown it away, he says with great courtesy "Now we may talk, Tuan. It is easy to send out death, but can your wisdom recall the life?” (p.177) Even Nina's lack of decency is ascribed to her white side of descent: "she is half white and knows no decency.” (p.128)

But as was stated at the outset, those critical of Conrad can marshal perhaps as impressive evidence from his fiction: For Almayer: "The Malays, you understand, are not company for a white man." (p.122); one can cite the offensive representation of Islamic polygamy, (p.45); how Arabs are represented as cowards, (p.47); and liars, (p.53).

One would hope that that Brierly of Lord Jim does not speak for the white man in general (at the time of the novel's publication) when he says: "Frankly, I don't care a snap for all the pilgrims that ever came out of Asia, but a decent man would not have behaved like this to a full cargo of old rags in bales." (p.68). Hence one would not wonder at GoGwilt's comment on Brierly's declaration: “The decency for which the "honour of craft" stands is the trust given for sustaining an international network of trade and commerce. Brierly's decency is revealed to be simple trading reason – old rags and pilgrims are so much cargo.” (p.51)

Indeed, the whole of the Patna inquiry in Lord Jim might be read as the progressive revelation of the underlying material interests of an international capitalist imperialist. And this is not the exclusion, but rather the rule. The pilgrims in Lord Jim are mocked for responding to the call of an idea, the lighthouse of the harbour winks in derision of the errand of faith; (p.15), the pilgrims are described as ignorant, (p.85), the Rajah’s depiction is repugnant, (p.228). On the other hand Jim's virtues are idealized, (pp.242-243); the Patusans are shown to be losers without Jim, (p.245). No one is in doubt who is master, as was made clear above. It is granted by the natives, granted by their leaders, felt to be so by the white above all. That the Malay helmsman in Lord Jim does not believe the whites, (p.98) does not change the above fact; nor that the white officers desert the ship, (p.115), as if it were an empty ship. That the white man is the master is granted by natives. He feels it. The world is his world and the others have either to accord him that status or are forced into it.

As we have referred to Heart of Darkness frequently enough, it is sufficient to add just one conclusion by Goonetilleke, who is mostly an admirer of Conrad, but not of Marlow, for : Marlow [is] unaware of the deep-seated trait of hypocrisy, and “the British were not less inhuman [than other] Western imperial powers.” (p.68)

And in Nostromo, it is of course the white man, Mr. Gould, who draws the future for Sulaco, himself being the ultimate leader. The English are idealized by the dictator Viola, (pp.30-31), by Decoud, (p.176), and by others, (pp.50-51); it is the English who can have hold on things, (p.239); the English (Captain Mitchell) are ranked as first, the other Europeans (Nostromo, 44) next, the
natives as inferior (Don Pépé, 112), although the West is secretly despised, (p.90); and sympathy for the natives is not lacking, (pp.90; 100-101)

Nobody is denying the Westerner’s scientific and technological amazing achievements, but he is unfair when he takes it for granted that if he has outshone the others scientifically and technologically, he has outshone them humanly, morally, and socially. Races, as Goonetilleke rightly notes, can be distinguished, but one race is certainly not congenitally superior or inferior to another. (p.10)

5. The Environment was Racist

How the situation was when Conrad migrated to the west, in the 1870s was not anything like fair or balanced: one extension of Darwin’s evolutionary theory in vogue at the time ranked nations from the lowest to the highest. But it was not to last long, as James J. Johnson (1999) asserts “The ascendancy of evolutionary ideas in the field of anthropology was very pronounced in the 1860s and 1870s but was relatively short-lived. By the end of the century, as James Clifford points out, ‘evolutionist confidence began to falter, and a new ethnographic conception of culture became possible. The word began to be used in the plural, suggesting a world of separate, distinctive, and equally meaningful ways of life’ (Clifford, 92-3).” (p.120)

When Conrad was being acquainted with the English scene, racialist propositions such as the innate superiority of the English over all races were often put forward – for instance, as Goonetilleke asserts, by Rhodes and Joseph Chamberlain – to justify imperialism. (p.10) English writers of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, as Sarah Cole (1998) tells us, produced a tremendous array of literature (including fiction, poetry, exploratory narratives, polemics, and official documents) that helped to rationalize Britain’s global domination. (p.253) In the middle of the nineteenth century, adds James M. Johnson, “Non-Europeans traditionally occupied an inferior position in the European view of the world.” (p.115)

It was a strict European centrality, that the nearer one is to it the higher. Johnson goes on to say:

For McLennan, Darwin, and Wallace,”, “distance from the European present becomes virtually synonymous with distance from the European center. This conflation of time and space is also evident in Spencer’s anthropological writings...Like his colleagues, Spencer achieves an understanding of the human past by turning away, momentarily, from the European center. Peoples such as the Bushmen, the Tasmanians, the Fuegians are denied a legitimate position within their own historical narratives so that the evolutionary master-narrative, with its final focus on contemporary Europe, can be completed. (pp.117-118)

A European marching among other nations seemed to see himself at best as walking among childlike nations and at worst as walking among worthless masses that he could eradicate or preserve at will. One may see this centrality put to practice in Leopold II’s inhuman dealing with the natives of the Congo. As Tony C. Brown (2000) points out: “In fin de siècle Europe, accounts of
grotesque atrocities occurring in Leopold II’s Congo Free State were appearing in an ever increasing quantity. A notable effect of this was the recurrence of an image of the Congo as an abject zone of horrors.” (p.16)

To read the end of Darwin’s ‘The Descent of Man’ (1871) before or after reading Heart of Darkness, one will not fail to see the obvious connection. In one of Darwin’s last paragraphs he says:

There can hardly be a doubt that we are descendants from barbarians. The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind – such were our ancestors.. He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creatures flows in his veins. (quoted by James M. Johnson 1997, 114)

To many, Conrad just accepted mindlessly the dominant philosophy. Thus, as James M. Johnson quotes: “V.Y. Mudimbe points out that due to the force of dominant ideologies, many schools of anthropology “repress otherness in the name of sameness, reduce the different to the already known, and thus fundamentally escape the task of making sense of other worlds.” (pp.72-73).” Johnson goes on to say: “Conrad’s version of the anthropological encounter (the contact, or confrontation, between different cultures) participates in precisely the narrow and reflexive gaze isolated by Mudimbe.” (p.112)

Indeed, Conrad did not do much to fathom the reality about Africa; he mostly accepted the negative image of Africa, the dark continent of the European imagination. And that goes for his other exotic novels and tales.

For the sympathizers, Conrad was presenting, for instance in Kurtz, the white at his worst. We have the distinguished Ian Watt asserting, “None of the possible sources for Kurtz seems to have equaled his murderous exploits, but there were other whites in Africa who did.” (p.145)

It should be stressed, though, that apart from condemning Conrad or admiring him, he believed, like many thinkers, that the west and the east were essentially incompatible. This is nowhere more elaborately worked out than in Almayer’s Folly’s Nina. The daughter of the white Almayer and the Malay Mrs. Almayer, Nina would not accept to identify with either. With her mixed parentage, Nina Almayer was an expression of crossing the barrier of races. She is both her parents’ point of cohesion and their battlefield, since they each fought to posses her. Neither succeed however, since, as Priscilla L. Walton (1995) says, “Nina’s character points to a means of creation that disrupts that of Almayer and Mrs. Almayer, for she does not attempt to order but to re-interpret and to co-create.” (p.9)

At best, unity may be viewed as possible in Conrad by preserving the distinctiveness of nations. As 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.” (p.17)
6. Inconclusive Modernist

From all the above, it should be evident that the conclusion cannot be some neat 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 just before Marlow was about to embark on his narrative, the second narrator predicted “that we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlowe’s inconclusive experiences.” (p.51) Which may connect well with what the same second 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.” (48) Was Conrad thinking of himself when he described the narrative in Heart of Darkness as ‘inconclusive’ and as not giving its significance but as the reader chooses?

One is warranted to make such conclusion, backed with the support of a conversation reported by a friend and editor of Conrad’s, Edward Garnett (1971), who paraphrases what Conrad told him in these words: “The sinister voice of the Congo with its murmuring undertone of human fatuity, baseness and greed had swept away the generous illusions of [Conrad’s] youth, and had left him gazing into the heart of an immense darkness.” (p.125) It is illuminating to add that, in the meeting of the two friends, Conrad never seemed satisfied with his own acumen. He even exclaimed: “I have spent half my life knocking about in ships, only getting ashore between voyages. I know nothing, nothing! except from the outside.” (p.126) No wonder then that his narrator Marlow never feels justified in penetrating beyond the surface.

His inconclusiveness is indeed more striking than either his loathsome racism or his admirable balance. His elusiveness at least wins him entry into the list of modernist writers. As Patrick Brantlinger (1985) says: “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.” (p.251)

Some may go as far as to see schizophrenia in his contradictory purposes. That is what Brantlinger ascribes to Fredric Jameson, in the latter’s The Political Unconscious. Brantlinger (1985) 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.’ …Conrad has anticipated his critics by constructing a story [Heart of Darkness] in which the "meaning" does not lie at the center, not even at "the heart of darkness," but elsewhere, in "misty haloes" and "moonshine" – forever beyond some vertiginous horizon which recedes as the would-be critic-adventurer sails towards it. (pp.373-375)

But is it so simple to make the last conclusion of a Conrad who only registers what he sees and hears without any penetration? What Conrad declared in the famous Preface to his “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’”, “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all to make you see,” (p.x) is not enough. Can an observer as perceptive as Conrad see so vividly and so thoroughly and yet so superficially? That
cannot be, as one can conclude from the first few lines of the same Preface: “Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect,” (p.viii). And so we are left with nothing better than this inconclusiveness that Conrad himself seemed to realize about himself.

What we have on the whole in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is an ambivalent status afforded colonialism, as it at once offers critics a perspective from which can be gained critical leverage on the discourse of colonialism and yet itself one of the most concentrated and influential documents of modern colonial discourse. Critics, as Sarah Cole (1998) states, tend to set off Conrad’s imperialist complicity against his modernism: he is either condemned for ascribing to popular notions of racial supremacy and difference, or, alternatively, his guilt is partially mitigated by his formal commitment to ambiguity, fragmentation, linguistic indeterminacy, and other strategies typically understood as modern. (p.252)

If the above proviso is accepted, then one can agree with Lionel Trilling when he says, as Brantlinger (1985) quotes him: “No one, to my knowledge, has ever confronted in an explicit way [Conrad’s] strange and terrible message of ambivalence toward the life of civilization.’ (p.378)

When, in *Heart of Darkness*, one is about to lay hand on a conclusion, at the climactic point in the novel, there is revealed the absolute and terrifying failure of signification and its attendant authority in the midst of the dark wilderness. That of course is why most identified Conrad as a modernist. As Tony C. Brown concludes about this novella: “*Heart of Darkness* has perversely proved a central document in postcolonial discourse.” (p.14)

Modernist or no modernist, there will always be many an Achebe condemning Conrad, and identifying him with Marlow, though we are cautioned against that by Goonetilleke:

Marlow’s national blindness is part of Conrad’s theme, and Conrad has selected a person from the right imperial country, Britain, who could see clearly and humanely the imperial involvement of a foreign country whose empire was comparatively recent and whose excesses were uncorrected. (p.68)

Spittles (1992) tries to define the source of the difficulty of ascertaining where Conrad stands:

It is a feature of Conrad’s fiction… that linguistic and structural ironies often make it difficult for the reader to know exactly what the author’s attitudes are towards the themes…Conrad was never either a consistently straightforward conservative or a convinced progressive. He judged cases individually, on their merit. (p.14)

It can be that he helped in bringing on the fall of imperialist values with his skepticism. Even if the final verdict is a condemnation of his racist attitude, with this feature alone he belonged in a way to the modern era of fiction.

A minor question needs to be disposed of here. Just how much Conrad was steeped in the parts he was representing in his fiction. Goonetilleke (1991) suggests that what he knew did not amount to much: “We can endorse Clifford’s judgement,” he says, “especially authoritative judgment coming from such a man, that in English literature, Conrad was the supreme interpreter.
of Malaya.” But a little further on he adds that Conrad’s experience of the Malay Archipelago was extremely slight. (pp.42-43)

In painting characters from the Third World, Conrad had the talent but not the experience.

7. His Life Experience Partly Explains His Inconclusiveness:

Looking for the dichotomy in Conrad’s psyche, Catherine Rising (2001) says:

The gap between Raskolnikov and Razumov [in Under Western Eyes] roughly parallels that between Dostoevsky, son of a Russian military doctor – a member of the hereditary nobility of Moskow – and Conrad, the orphan son of an exiled Polish revolutionary. As such, Conrad was a pariah entitled to no future in his native Russia beyond twenty-five years’ compulsory military service… [Dostoevsky] presents a milder face of Russian society than that seen by Conrad, who like his creature Rasumov felt himself, and was, an alien… For the traumatized and displaced Conrad, a Pole turned English novelist – as for the displaced teacher of languages who narrates Under Western Eyes – words are, and stubbornly remain, ‘the great foes of reality’ (Under Western Eyes, p.3) (p.25)

The point here is that in our attempt to account for Conrad’s skepticism and elusiveness, it is quite natural, to understand him as Catherine Rising has done, in the light of some of his characters like the teacher of languages of Under Western Eyes.

One can draw on a generalization about exile in modern thought put forth by Nico Israel (1997):

Exile informs most of the significant strands of modern social and philosophical thought … a misty halo of exile seems to surround the spectral figure of Conrad himself. The author, the familiar biographical yarn goes, lived “three lives,” each of them, in a different sense, exilic: born in the Russian-occupied Ukraine to a family of aristocratic Polish political refugees, he traveled the world as a mariner before becoming a naturalized British citizen, eventually, one of his adopted country’s most famous novelists. Lonely and misunderstood as a child, as an adolescent, and as an adult, on land and on sea, Conrad apparently suffered from a peculiarly acute form of national and psychical deracination. Given his impressive exilic pedigree and employment experience, it is not especially astonishing that Conrad’s novelistic portrayals of such figures as Marlow, Jim, Decoud, Razumov, Verloc, and Heyst tend, in many critical accounts, to become with Conrad’s own biographical narrative, producing a composite persona regarded as the exilic ne plus ultra of Anglo-American modernism. (pp.1-3 html.)

A Conradian short story, ‘Amy Foster’, has come to be regarded as the most vivid dramatization of Conrad’s agony: It has become customary among Conrad scholars to read ‘Amy Foster’ as Conrad’s apocryphal autobiographical reflection on his life in England.

The main character of ‘Amy Foster’ is Yanko Goorall. The plight of Goorall, an Eastern European peasant shipwrecked while attempting to emigrate to America curiously parallels that of Conrad’s residing, on his first arrival into England, in Winchelsea, Kent, (which is only a few miles away from where Goorall was shipwrecked). Conrad felt as much misunderstood by the English as Goorall felt. Goorall marries a ‘plain’ English woman, as reported by Najdar Zdzislaw. (p.215)
Indeed, his early experiences and memories were never abandoned. Quite late in his career he wrote Under Western Eyes, and in the Author’s Note to this work there is an urgent exhortation to West to work against the tyrannical power which had colonized his own country. He attacked in that Note both the Russian tyranny and the resistance trying to bring it down; they were a “senseless desperation provoked by senseless tyranny.” (p.viii) A little further down he adds: “The ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and in fact basing itself upon complete anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolutionism encompassing destruction by the first means to hand.” (p.x)

Yes, his life does go some way to solving some of the mystery of Conrad’s famous inconclusiveness; but indeed it is not the plan here, nor is there grounds to claim, that the mystery will ever be solved; for, as this paper has been contending all along, it was not intended to be solved by this great writer. We have some justification in suspecting that Conrad deliberately chose to present fiction which has the maximum of appeal, but which offers the minimum of focusing, a misty halo which the more you approach the farther it recedes.

Endnotes

1. A statement made by Marlow, the second narrator of Heart of Darkness, p. 82 (Unless otherwise noted, all references to Conrad’s works are to Dent’s Collected Edition, London, 1968.)

2. Although it is not quite fair to extract this last offending statement out of context: see Heart of Darkness, p. 96

3. It is curious enough to note how this last statement of Marlow’s appeared to Achebe as incriminating both Marlow and his creator, as quoted in Section II.
cheon Kôntâd: Masâd âl-âstûmâr âm mânawî lîh té?

Abd al-lâfi fiyâyî al-Mâlîsh

al-

لقد ظلت مواقف جوزيف كونراد حول الاستعمار والأعراق موضوعاً، لكتابات لا تزال تتفق باستمرار. لقد كان لا يزال من الصعب أن تقرر الحقيقة حوله وأن يصدر الحكم النهائي حول موقفه الأخلاقي من الاستعمار والأعراق. وحينما نعود إلى أعماله الأدبية نجد كثيراً من الشواهد يستطيع أن يقيسها كلا خصومه والمعجبين به. صحيح أن كونراد نفسه صرح بأنه قاتل بأن يتعاطف مع الإنسان العادي، مما كان موطئه، إلا أن هذا القول لم يقطع كثيرين من نقده. لقد رأى كثيرون أن كونراد تلقى بلا روية الموقف الثقافي للإنسان الأبيض كما ظهر عند علماء الاجتماع والاشترابولوجيا الفيكتوريين. بينما أ عبر كثيرون أيضاً للدفاع عنه وقوله. ولكن البحث الحالي يطرح فكرة أن هناك عوامل متصلة في أدب كونراد، وربما في شخصيته، تجعل من غير الممكن الوصول إلى حكم نهائي حول هذا الموضوع. إن عدم اليقين شيء عميق في عقل كونراد، وهذا ما يعكس على أدبه. والواقع أن واحده من محوري هذا البحث هو أن ظاهرة ثقافية المواقف في أوضح من أي من الموقعين الآخرين الذين ينصر لمن المهاجمون أو المدافعون عنه. والنقدة المعاصرة الأخرى في البحث أن رغم أن أحداث حياة كونراد يمكن أن تلقى بعض الضوء على موقفه الثانوي، إلا أن النظير مستقر في عقل كونراد. لأنه اختيار عن عدم فيما يبدو أن يكون موقفه غير حاسم.
References


