

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Ravindra Pantavane

Asst. Professor

Department of English

Vidyasagar Kala Mahavidyalaya

Khairi, Ramtek, India

Dr. Karthik Panicker

Asst. Professor

Department of English J.M.Patel College

Bhandara, Maharashtra, India

karthikpanicker2025@gmail.com

### Alienation and Isolation in Conrad's Novels

Abstract: The emotional conflict of man in the alienated situation is a recurrent theme in Conrad's fiction. Internal conflicts and emotional experiences are the soul of his novels. One of the striking similarities between Conrad, Camus and Sartre is their emphasis on the loneliness and isolation, self-imposed or circumstantial, of their major characters and the anguish resulting from their isolation. Conrad's life was filled with numerous episodes of exile, loneliness and isolation. As a child of four, he saw his father's exile for political activities from Warsaw to Vologda, the distant Russian province. Almayer, Marlow, Kurtz, Willems, Decoud, Mrs. Decoud, Jim, Stein, Nostromo and many other key characters suffer under psychological or external crisis. This paper concentrates on the theme of isolation and alienation in the fictional venture of Joseph Conrad, specially produced from 1895 to 1905: the first and middle phase of Conrad's literary career.

Key-words: Alienation, isolation, solitude, ideals, community, despair, emotional experiences

“Great books are concerned with the moral life of human beings. Central to the modern depiction of that political-moral subject is the individual’s awareness of his isolated situation” (Spender, 17). Conrad's novels explain the true meaning of this statement. One of the most striking similarities between Conrad, Comus and Sartre is their emphasis on the loneliness and isolation of their major characters and the anguish resulting from this isolation.

*Almayer’s Folly*, the first novel published in 1895, is about Almayer’s self-destructive egoism. He is alienated from the laws and restrictions of the organized community life. He pursues his dream and personal idea of power. Conrad concerns himself with the disillusioned aspirations and worthlessness of the self-indulgent European. Vernon Young explains the first attempt of Conrad as “Conrad’s first literary edifice” was constructed “on the foundation of Almayer’s despair” (Young). A sense of solitude and loneliness hovers over Almayer, Nina, Willems and Aissa and at times overwhelms them. An important factor that adds to the sense of isolation in *Almayer and Willems* is that they are representatives of European civilization in an alien land. Almayer expresses his desire for freedom - his wish is to get away from the shackles of Malay jungle: “I have been trying to get out of this infernal place for twenty years, and I can’t. You hear, man! I can’t and never shall! Never!” (*Almayer’s Folly*, 112)

*An Outcast of the Islands* has the Malayan setting. It repeats the themes of estrangement, and the perils of isolation. Willems suffers shame and humiliation as an outcast but pride, arrogance, and anger prevail upon him. He tries to find comfort through passion – his love for Aissa, the daughter of a blind Arab chieftain, Omar. Willems experiences loneliness and isolation in his new life at Sambir. He finds himself separated from his natural surrounding and from his kind in space, and feels “a sense of bitter loneliness ... as if he was the outcast of all mankind” (*An Outcast of the Island*, 15). His moral geographic isolation leads to the dissolution of his consciousness under the menacing influence of Aissa. He feels that he alone was “left

outside the scheme of creation in a hopeless immobility” and this feeling fills him with “tormenting anger and with ever-stinging regret” (29). Here, Willems’ loneliness, like Almayer’s, is self-imposed. Being egoist fellow, he fails to establish a rapport with Almayer, another white man living in Sambir. Willems lives in physical isolation and even love proves ineffective in dispelling his solitude. From the first moment, the timeless world of Willems and Aissa is simply an illusion covering their real isolation from each other. They are completely disconnected: “They had nothing in common—not a thought, not a feeling; he could not make clear to her the simplest motive of any act of his... and he could not live without her” (56). Isolation surrounds Willems on Lingard’s departure and he experiences enforced severance from the community. A sense of solitude and loneliness overtakes all the three – Willems, Aissa, and the serving-woman — as they sit by the side of the river:

Those three human beings abandoned by all were like shipwrecked people left on an insecure and slippery ledge by the retiring tide of an angry sea – listening to the distant roar, living anguish between the menace of its return and hopeless horror of their solitude - in the midst of the tempest of passion, of regret, of disgust, of despair. (141)

Conrad stresses more effectively the intensity of Willem’s lonely plight by reflecting his emotion through natural imagery. He shows that even nature is indifferent to human sufferings. It leaves Willems utterly “alone, small and crushed” (141). Conrad concludes the story on a modernist note that loneliness is man’s lot. It is “the tremendous fact of our isolation, of that loneliness impenetrable and transparent, elusive and everlasting; of the indestructible loneliness that surrounds, envelops, clothes every human soul from the cradle to the grave, and perhaps beyond”(107). Here, Conrad shows the intensity of isolated psyche of his character.

*The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad's third novel, appears as a powerful commentary on the concept of the cruel and insensitive universe where man is alone and hopeless. The story illustrates how man is insignificant and powerless when he faces external danger of the mighty forces of sea and weather, renders his plight intensely lonely. The sense of duty and the fight against the enemy are the common factors for the crew of the *Narcissus* but they are, as individuals, alien and unknown to one another. As the story advances, Conrad, to impart further poignancy to the emotional experiences of the men, stresses their isolation, both as collective crew of the ship and as individuals.

The loneliness of the voyage is highlighted: "a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like small planet...a great circular solitude is moved with her, ever changing and ever the same, always monotonous and always imposing" (*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, 22). The ship which carries handful of men dissociated them from the rest of the mankind. They have no alternatives; to surrender to weather was their destiny. Almost every natural object imparts added intensity to the unbroken solitude.

*Heart of Darkness* is Conrad's comment on the human predicament. Marlow, the central character, strives for a meaning in the ineluctable conditions of existence. He realizes that man is isolated in an alien universe. Man is, no doubt, a part of the universe, but he is alone in it. Marlow narrates his story sitting on the deck of the ship *Nellie*, anchored on the Thames. Physically immobilized by the tide, Marlow and his audience are isolated from everything else. The physical isolation is coupled with the closeness of the group. Although part of the group to which he is narrating the tale, Marlow is alienated from them in one respect: he is the only member of the group who lives on the sea. The reader's attention is focused on the physical immediacy of Marlow's presence as he sits cross-legged with the ascetic aspect of the Buddha-like idol. "Marlow's lotus posture," points out W. B. Stein, "shows that he is ready to contemplate the chaos out of which order of chaos comes" (Stein, 235). The Buddha postures

that Marlow assumes, accentuate the deeply introspective contemplation on the Nellie. The journey into the self has to be made in isolation. To perceive the truth of Kurtz, the readers also have to detach themselves from the inherited experience. Marlow's internal isolation later, when he reaches the inner station and confronts Kurtz. His feelings of isolation deepen as he leaves the sea. He feels a shower to the land and finds it dark, grim. He is at once struck by the atmosphere of decay and death. He meets with more capacity, more irrational activity, and more inhumanity at the company station. Marlow is interviewed by the manager who inspires immediate uneasiness in him. The hostile relationship is set at first sight. Without considering Marlow's condition after his long Journey, the manager begins to speak of his own problems. Therefore, Marlow's feels alienated from the manager who is a hollow man: "Perhaps there was nothing within him" (*Heart of Darkness*, 15). In addition to this, he dissociates himself from the pilgrims who look unwholesome to him. He feels alienated from them and they, in turn, look upon Marlow with dishonour.

*Lord Jim* is also a story of the alienated human psyche. Lord Jim, unable to take a decision in life, drifts away from life and becomes a detached person. His inner life becomes a dream world: "they were the best part of life, its secret truth, its hidden reality" (*Lord Jim*, 8). Alienated from the community, Jim takes refuge in dreams. His predilection for dreams of heroism dulled his ability to participate in the world of action. Jim felt like leaping overboard but the restraining hand of the captain stopped him; subsequently, he justified to himself his own inaction and came to the conclusion that he was not really afraid or fearful but was capable of heroic actions. The Patna steady journey across the placid sea allows Jim to live quite isolated. He feels isolated and lonely during the course of the inquiry. His act of cowardice has cut him off from the society. He is to endure the humiliation and embarrassment of realizing that his jump was not necessary. He is to live in a society which condemns him for his act. He needs somebody in whom he can confide.

Daniel R. Schwarz observes *Nostramo* as the story of men “seeking to define their lives in bold and heroic terms” (Schwarz). The novel shows that the process of discovering themselves through personal ideas they discover instead the self-contradictory nature of such ideals, and the suffering of unbearable loneliness which accompany them. The mythical background, too, serves to produce the sense of remoteness from the world of material values.

In *Nostramo*, Conrad shifts his emphasis from the spiritual history of solitary individual to a world of turmoil. Sulaco is isolated from the rest of the country by a high range of mountains. The islands called “the Isabels” form a kind of barrier against the open sea. The mercantile adventures are kept away by the prevailing calm of the gulf and the mountains around the preserve quasi-independence for Sulaco. Sir John’s comment emphasizes the isolation of Sulaco: “I had no notion that a place on a sea-coast could remain isolated from the world” (*Nostramo*, 36). Through the mountain ranges, Conrad explores the vision of man lost in the colossal jungle. The towering mountain ranges offer a contrast to the midget mankind and convey a sense of the loneliness of the characters. Intensely painful decisions and confrontations appear to take place in a void as real as the placid and impenetrably dark gulf. Mr. Gould, haunted by the fixed idea, wishes to reopen the mine. His idealism convinces him that silver can be extracted from the mine and can be used to bring law, order, stability, peace, and prosperity to a land of poverty. For him, the mine is a matter of life and death. Having become an unswerving passion, the mine corrupts him gradually. Instead of being a means, it becomes his end and withers all that is fine and generous and human in his nature. Gould becomes a figure of inhuman coldness. The mine alienates him from his wife, his workers and himself. Gould’s regular overnight stay at mine suggests his physical remoteness from his wife. This physical separation magnifies the distance between the Goulds as man and wife. When she tries to talk to him about her loneliness Gould says: “I thought you had understood me

perfectly from the first ... I thought we had said all there was to say a long time ago. There is nothing to say now.”(207)

Mrs. Gould, a sympathetic person, tirelessly works for the poor, the sick and the lonely. Mrs. Gould's keeping herself busy in ideal philanthropic activity cannot preserve her from disillusion. She realizes the insignificance and futility of her altruistic attitude to life. She has sacrificed herself for her husband and now she is alone with broken ideals. She is as solitary as any human being had ever been, perhaps, on this earth. The lonely childless existence of Mrs. Gould exasperates Moryham: “Was it for this that her life had been robbed of all the intimate felicities of daily affection which her tenderness needed as the human body needs air to breathe?” (512)

Martin Decoud, too, faces the alienation. Very tired and unaccustomed to rowing, he suffers cruelly. His scepticism is immediately touched by the isolation of the gulf. The time spent in the complete obscurity of the gulf separates him from life in Sulaco. He feels that his earlier life has been superficial. All life appears meaningless and futile, destined to end in darkness such as this:

Like a man lost slumber, he heard nothing, he saw nothing. Even his hand is held before his face did not exist for his eyes. The change from agitation, the passions and the dangers, from the sights and sounds of the shore, was so complete that it would have resembled death had it been for the survival of his thoughts. (262)

Decoud commits Suicide because he has no ideology to enable him to endure his isolation. Nostromo's conflict over the silver becomes a fear of losing his fine reputation and of the subsequent shame and disgrace if his theft is discovered. This haunts Nostromo like a curse. He staggers under the weight of his secret and the loneliness which is its price. The tyranny of

his treasure weighs upon “his mind, his action, his very sleep” (529). He loses his peace of mind and feels morally isolated.

These few novels dealt with, thus show that the nature of isolation in Conrad’s novels, whether self-inflicted or circumstantial, is eventually emotional and moral. This aspect distinguishes the modernist hero in the critical situation, who must struggle and endure alone. Through all these themes, Conrad imparts that special awareness of the comedian protagonist, of the existence as different and distanced from others. Isolations in Conrad’s stories, therefore, brings out the emotional break with the objective in life, thought and action, and thereby gives special significance to the unique behaviour of the isolated sensibility which the modern novels celebrate. From the study of the isolated and alienation, Conrad, therefore deserves to be counted as a modernist.

## Works Cited

- Conrad, Joseph. *Almayer's Folly*. London: Hachette India, 2009.
- . *An Outcast of the Islands*. Garden City, New York: World Public library Association, 2001. Page. <wwwWorldLibrary.net>.
- . *Heart of Darkness*. Gutenberg Consortia Center. n.d. Print. 26 9 2018.  
<http://WorldLibrary.net>.
- . *Lord Jim*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993.
- . *Nostromo*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication India Pvt.Ltd., 2012.
- . *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. London: Hachette India, 2009.
- Schwarz, Daniel R. "Conrad's Quarrel with Politics: The Disrupted Family in Nostromo." *The University of Toronto Quarterly* Volume. XLVII 1977: 38.
- Spender, Stephen. *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs*. Philadelphia: Albert Saifer, 1953.
- Stein, William Bysshe. *The Lotus Posture and The Heart of Darkness* . Modern Fiction Studies,II, 1956.
- Young, Vernon. "Lingard's Folly, The Lost Subject." *Kenyon Review* Autumn 1953: 526.