Eighth Chapter

There is no gainsaying the fact that Conrad is, by no means and in no case, as prolific as Henry James, H. G. Wells or R. L. Stevenson. Nevertheless, his fictional universe covers a fairly large chunk of the world’s geographical territory and contains a considerable number of more or less graphically portrayed female characters who belong not only to different nations but also to different social and economic strata which, on many occasions, account for their different natures and actions. Since Conrad travelled extensively and had a great amount of first-hand exposure to diverse nations and their cultures as a sailor, the diversity of the backgrounds of his women is natural. Even a very cursory survey will indicate the breadth of his artistic canvas and the variety of his female characters depicted thereon. For instance, Mrs. Hervey in The Return, Mrs. Traverse in The Rescue, Felicia in The Planter of Malata and the nameless female revolutionary in The Informer are either wives or daughters of famous, rich, well-placed English husbands or fathers; Mrs. MacWhirr in Typhoon (wife of the commander of a ship) and Mrs. Fyne in Chance (wife of a petty bureaucrat), are middle middle-class English ladies; Mrs. Winnie Verloc in The Secret Agent (at first daughter of a licensed victualler and then wife of a secret agent who actually pursues many professions) and Miss Bessie Carvil in Tomorrow (daughter of a retired boat-
builder) belong to the lower-middle class of English society whereas Alma in *Victory* is so poor that she runs away from home, takes to prostitution and becomes a violinist in an ambulant ladies’ orchestra touring the east. Then, there are French women like Rita and Therese in *The Arrow of Gold*, Susan in *The Idiots* (All of them originally belong to poor French peasantry though thanks to Henry Allègre’s generosity and patronage, Rita attains fame and prosperity.), Arlette in *The Rover* (who, of course, is a member of a well-to-do French farmer family which holds itself aloof from the masses) and Flora in *Chance* (daughter of a bankrupt French father and a prematurely dead Scottish mother) Besides, there are middle-class Danish (Freya, daughter of an enterprising but timorous tobacco-growing father in *Freya of the Seven Isles*), middle-class German (niece of a German master mariner named Hermann in *Falk*), poor Italian (Mrs. Viola and her two daughters in *Nostromo*) poor American (Mrs. Blunt in *The Arrow of Gold*), poor Spanish women (Dona Erminia, daughter of an aristocrat father ruined by the commoners in *Gaspar Ruiz* and the witchlike inn-keepers in *The Inn of the Two Witches*) in Conrad. The long list which does not end here includes Russian (all female characters in *Under Western Eyes* out of which Eleanor belongs to the higher, Nathalie and her mother to the middle and Tekla and Sophia to the lower strata of Russian society), middle-class and indigent Australian (Mrs. Davidson, wife of Mr. Davidson in *Because of the Dollars*), and an extremely miserable street-walker
Laughing Anne in the same novella), wealthy yet idealistic, poor yet dignified South American (originally English, Mrs. Gould is a devoted Costaguenera in *Nostromo* and the same is true of an originally Spanish woman named Antonia Avellanos appearing in the same novel), mostly half-caste, benighted, savage and poor Asian (Nina and her mother in *Almayer’s Folly*, Aïssa and Joanna in *An Outcast of the Islands*, Jewel in *Lord Jim* and Immada in *The Rescue*) and even one African woman (Kurtz’s Intended in *Heart of Darkness*).

Surely, it is difficult, nay, well-nigh impossible to deal out an even-handed justice to this motley group and it needs no reiteration that Conrad has failed to do justice to all these characters in equal measure. A number of critics have pointed out and that too rightly, that his women (specially non-western women) are negatively portrayed, that they are rich in physical qualities but poor in mental and intellectual attributes \(^1\), that the portrayal of even a major character like Mrs. Edith Traverse is plainly uneven and unconvincing \(^2\), that Conrad does not understand love, that he is inept in his treatment of sex \(^3\). Furthermore, Conrad’s instability of attitude to women, his occasional indulgence in misogyny \(^4\) and his blatantly racist statements \(^5\) have given his critics a very long handle. But these lapses and aberrations on the author’s part (which are occasional) and these adverse critical pronouncements (that are but value judgements revealing half-truths) must not lead us to adopt a blatantly
dismissive attitude to his women as that will make us throw away the baby with the bathwater, blow away the grain with the chaff and our losses will be enormous. In fact, in Conrad where the contours of the scenario (as far as the portrayal of women is concerned) are ill-defined, where the authorial attitude is far from consistent, the soundest approach will be to take up individual cases, judge them with as much care, caution, moderation, objectivity and patience as one is capable of exercising, consider their merits or otherwise so that we may arrive at balanced conclusions. In any case, some of the charges levelled by critics against Conrad’s portrayal of women are not unanswerable. For instance, Moser’s criticism that Conrad does not understand love can be countered by the subtle accounts of the marriages of the Goulds and the Verlocs. In the treatment of sex, where Conrad is supposed to be inept according to Moser once again, there is the great scene of sexual impact when Willems sets eyes on Aissa. Again, some oriental women of Conrad are vocal, fairly intelligent, if not formally educated. It is true that Conrad speaks against women at times, but it is also true that he speaks in their favour as well. And Conrad portrays not only oriental women but also occidental women unfavourably.

Broadly speaking, Conrad has romanticized and satirized women irrespective of their nationalities, their social and economic backgrounds. He has not only measured the height of their greatness but also plumbed the depth
of their degradation since he is aware that “Women are ready to rise to the heights of devotion unattainable by us men, or to sink into the depths of abasement which amazes our masculine prejudices” (Gaspar Ruiz, pp24-25).

In this he is like Galsworthy, his contemporary and friend who looks at both sides of important social problems in his plays. He depicts both savage, loving women of the east and ordinary European women who transcended their ordinariness by virtue of their capacity for love, loyalty and sacrifice. He draws both advanced, educated, self-effacing women (who are partly modern and partly Victorian) and stupid, narrow-minded, selfish viragos. Conrad’s ambivalent attitude to women is reflected even in the positive and negative roles that they are allowed to play in men’s lives as agents of moral transformation. Like his predecessors and contemporaries (Hardy, Dickens, Henry James that is) he lovingly and diligently inventories the different parts of female body, exaggerates their follies and foibles to expose them and painstakingly chronicles the history of their fine consciences. But unlike them (Dickens and Hardy in particular) he uses path-breaking narrative devices like multiple perspectives and prefiguring technique (by using pregnant images) in the first decades of the twentieth century. So, taking everything into consideration, the overall quality of the intellectual fare that the author serves is undeniably mixed and one has to taste and test them with, to repeat what we
have stated a little earlier, some degree of care, caution, moderation, objectivity and patience.
Notes and references


4. Conrad expresses his misogyny in Heart of Darkness through Kurtz and Marlow. For the full texts of the observations of these two characters, please see the notes to the sixth chapter.

5. See the following lines in The Rescue which overtly demonstrate the author’s
pro-western attitude "Mrs. Traverse fixed her eyes on Immada. Fair-haired and white she asserted herself before the girl of olive face and raven locks with the maturity of perfection, with the superiority of the flower over the leaf, of the phrase that contains a thought over the cry that can only express an emotion. Immense spaces and countless centuries stretched between them". p141

6. Jewel, Aissa and Mrs. Almayer are presumably without formal education but the various activities (dwelt on in the previous chapters) they perform speak volumes for their common sense, intelligence, mental strength, oratorical gift and manipulative skill. And as far as Nina is concerned, she is articulate, ambitious, intelligent and certainly not as uneducated as most of these characters.

7. For the change in Conrad’s attitude to women, please see the notes to the sixth chapter where the observation of Marlow in Chance indicates a clear shift in the author’s attitude to the softer sex.

8. Please see the fourth chapter for a detailed discussion on the negatively-drawn western and eastern female characters.