Joseph Conrad has traditionally been regarded as a 'Sea-dreamer' and a spinner of exotic yarns. This reputation persisted till the first half of this century. In recent times, however, there have been attempts to reclaim Conrad from the stereotyped rubrics and restore him to his proper position. The socio-political and cultural aspects of his works are being explored and analysed. But to dub Conrad as a writer of political novels as the genre has developed now and to see him through the same critical stance as we may apply in case of some modern novelists like George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, Milan Kundera etc. would be erroneous. Conrad was not a believer in any particular political ideology and the political and cultural implications in his works are not explicit but implicit and must be taken in their proper perspective to bring out their real significance in the over-all scheme of Conradian values. The present thesis is an attempt in this direction.

Chapter I traces Conrad's background -- historical and political and attempts to bring out the significance of certain historical and biographical facts for an appropriate assessment of his works. It also discusses the cultural and political imperatives that largely shaped his perspective. Conrad was born and brought up in a Poland rent asunder by Russian oppression. Later in life, he
became a British citizen. Thus, from the member of a colonised community, he became the citizen of a colonising country. This provided him with sufficient knowledge of both sides of the fence. It is this vantage point that enabled him to reject Polish Romanticism as the idealism of the foolhardy, to seriously question English and Swiss democracies for allowing inefficiency and mob-rule and to adopt a sceptical attitude towards all forms of popular revolt.

Chapter II is devoted to an assessment of Conrad's first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*. These works have received little attention from critics. Although the political and cultural implications in these novels have a spirit of tentativeness and may, at times, seem a carry over of the stereotypes supplied by colonial fictions, they are important inasmuch as they clearly foreshadow some of the dominant themes, attitudes and characters dealt with in his major novels. *Almayer's Folly* deals with the story of the Dutchman Almayer who marries a native woman. An analysis has been made of the racial tensions that vitiate their 'mixed' marriage and of the prolonged and traumatic identity crisis of their daughter Nina who eventually casts her fate with Dain Maroola, the native prince. *An Outcast of the Islands* is an inverse sequel of the same story. The central characters are Willems
and Aissa who are irresistibly drawn to each other. But their love cannot transcend the barriers of culture. It has been shown how the sporadic incursions of European powers on the native societies resulted in political and cultural disorientation of native people.

The long story "An Outpost of Progress" and the novella Heart of Darkness have been discussed in Chapter III. "An Outpost" has been treated as a sort of prelude to Heart of Darkness. The central characters in the story -- Kayer-ts and Carlier may reasonably be regarded as the forerunners of Kurtz, the hollowman. The story brings out the unhealthy implications of petty trading on the fringes of the Empire. The same implications have received extensive treatment in the discussion of Heart of Darkness. The richness and complexity of the political and cultural meanings have been discussed in details; of course, the metaphysical dimension has not been totally eschewed. The hypocrisy and megalomania that lay behind the ostensible philanthropic mission of the Europeans have been exposed. It has been pointed out how the Europeans destroyed the traditional social structure without replacing it by an alternative order. This made a whole community of people aliens in their own land.

Chapter IV discusses Nostromo which is arguably Conrad's most complex exegesis of the cultural and political
fate of nations in underdeveloped and developing countries. Conrad anticipates prophetically the role of economic imperialism and the kind of politics it would breed. Charles Gould and his wife Emilia reopen the San Tome silver mine with the help of American investment. They start with the assumption that the well-being of the people is not only related to but a natural concomitant of the material prosperity that will emanate from the silver mine. But Costaguana is politically unstable. Political regimes change with astonishing rapidity. This entails shifting of loyalties by politicians and generals, all in the name of liberty and democracy though in fact to achieve personal power and wealth. The native culture in Costaguana was in a fluid state and could not develop any mature or comprehensive political sense and an appreciation of the national problems around which debates could take place. The inevitable result is a brand of politics brazenly opportunistic. The regimes change but the acquisitive and predatory instincts persist.

Chapter V discusses The Secret Agent which registers Conrad's excursion into unexplored terrains. The world of The Secret Agent is one of terrorism, anarchism, espionage and doublecross. The central character is the secret agent Verloc who is, in fact, a double agent. He
is an anarchist as well as a police informer. He maintains a precarious existence by fostering radical activities as well as generating reactionary fears. This paradox of order fails when Verloc makes a go at the Greenwich Observatory at the incitement of Vladimir and about which he could not possibly inform Heat, the police Inspector. Attention has been focussed on Conrad's remarkable insights into the real motives of anarchists and how they worked. Conrad's portrayal of the anarchists as a bunch of ineffectual people reinforces the impotence of anarchism as a political movement. It has been shown how the seemingly just and democratic social order of England harboured deep injustice and exploitation of the poor. The vision presented by the novel is a deeply pessimistic one because of the total absence of any kind of social commitment by any character.

Chapter VI discusses Under Western Eyes that marks the culmination of Conrad's mature thinking on a number of issues -- political, cultural and metaphysical. Since it is a story about Russia's political and cultural past and Slav psychology, Conrad's special relationship with Russia has been examined in the beginning. The story revolves around Razumov, who, although cultivates studied neutrality and non-involvement, gets implicated in the discontent raging around him against Tsarist despotism. Haldin, a
fellow student and the assassin of Mr. de P takes refuge in Razumov's room and thus implicates him. Though Razumov betrays Haldin to police through his putative father, Prince K, he cannot get back his former freedom. An analysis has been made of the inexorable nature of politics in Russia during Conrad's time. Both the police and the revolutionists try to exploit Razumov against each other. Unable to fulfil any of his assumed roles, Razumov, consumed with anguish and remorse, confesses before the revolutionists and rendered a cripple by them. The tyranny and brutality of senseless despotism, the schizophrenia of Russian politics and life in Russia during the pre-revolutionary era have been critically examined. In the course of discussion it has been pointed out how the Russian and the Western world have been conceived as two cultural counterpoints, mutually antagonistic and irreconcilable.

Chapter VII concludes the thesis by summarising the findings in the earlier chapters and giving a resume of the preceding treatment. Conrad was luckier than many other writers in that his books received comprehensive critical attention both during his lifetime and afterwards. His essentially modern imagination that accepts the validity of irreconcilable attitudes, his ideas about the inexorable nature of politics, the historical and cultural determination of people living in a particular society etc. will continue to have their relevance and challenge the critical mind over a long period of time to come.

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