Chapter-I

INTRODUCTION
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THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Joseph Conrad occupies an important place in the galaxy of modern novelists. Though a writer of uncommon merit, he was not a 'popular' novelist. He was a Pole by birth and inspite of being the inhabitant of a land-locked country he showed great fascination for the sea. He was the most prominent among the few expatriate writers in the world who attained fame by writing in a foreign language. The son of a life-long rebel, Joseph Conrad was quite a different man from his father. The father, Apollo Korzeniowski was an arch-radical sacrificing his life, family and property at the altar of Polish freedom. But the son had a profoundly conservative 'streak in his outlook. Nevertheless, throughout his life Joseph Conrad himself was a sympathiser of the
Polish cause and he condemned Russian autocracy bitterly and vehemently. Living far away from the land of his birth he never failed to react sharply in moments of its political and cultural crises. Though not actively involved in the struggle of the Poles, he served the cause in his own way.

Conrad's reputation as a writer, at least for the first half of this century, rested chiefly on his sea-tales and exotic yarns. In the popular mind he was thought to be primarily a dabbler in exoticism. Conrad himself was upset being labelled in this way. In his letters and essays, he tried to dispel the impression that he was merely a 'Sea-dreamer' or a spinner of exotic yarns, but without much success. In one of his letters to Sidney Colvin, Conrad complained quite late in life: "I may say that I have not been very well understood. I have been called a writer of the sea, of the tropics, a descriptive writer, a romantic writer -- and also a realist. But as a matter of fact all my concern has been with the 'ideal value' of things, events and people."¹

But in recent years Conrad has been reclaimed from the shackles of stereotyped rubrics and attempts are being made to throw light on other significant aspects of his novels and discover their social, political and cultural dimensions.

It is said that great writers create mostly out of their own personal experiences over which an extraordinarily fertile imagination works. Their lives provide them with the warp and woof out of which they create masterpieces of art. This could not be more true in the case of Conrad. The circumstances of his life in a way fashioned the direction of his career as a writer and it may be said almost with certainty that his books would have been different if he were not a sailor and a Polish emigree. Besides, unlike other contemporary writers like Kipling, Haggard, Henley and Stevenson who wrote about the experiences on the fringes of the Empire, Conrad lived both as a native of a colonised country and as a member of a colonising community. So he could achieve a comprehensiveness in his outlook and attitude which they rarely did. It is for these reasons that his art is intimately related to his biography and the dominant political and cultural tendencies of the day which
are important sources for the study and appreciation of Conrad.

As pointed out above, to grasp the cultural and political dimensions in Joseph Conrad's works, it is important to study some aspects of his life, family background and his early impressions. We must, however, resist all attempts to reduce the significance of his works to their causal or biographical origins. Joseph Conrad was born at Berdichew in Ukraine, then a part of Russia, on Dec. 3, 1857. He was born in a family of patriots from the sides of both his father and mother. His father's family appear to have been Utopian dreamers, given to passionate involvement in hopeless political adventures. His grandfather was a fiery patriot ever ready to take horse and drive invaders from his beloved Polish soil. His mother's family, the Bobrowskis, appreciated the more conventional and practical virtues. Apollo Korzeniowski, Conrad's father, was a man of genius but full of conflicts and contradictions. An active rebel against Russian oppression in Poland, he was an idealist in political matters, a romantic, a poet, a translator and a playwright of some gifts. He was a witness to the forces of division and disintegration
of his country — a Poland which was divided in three successive stages — in 1772, 1793 and 1795 among Russia, Prussia and Austria. Thus Poland as a geographical entity did not exist. But the physical division of the country led to its spiritual unification and a regular and sustained national movement grew up. Baby Conrad breathed the atmosphere of tension, idealism and struggle in which his father was actively involved.

The history of Poland witnessed by Conrad was a history of its successive divisions by imperial powers and a policy of unrelieved suppression by the Victorious Powers. In 1793, in the second of the three partitions that cost Poland her autonomy, Ukraine was turned over to imperial Russia. In the third and final partition of Poland which took place in 1795, Russia grabbed the major portion of Poland. From then on the Russian government became more oppressive and the Polish people turned particularly hostile to Russia. In 1829, there was a popular uprising against Russia in which Teodor Korzeniowski, the grandfather of Joseph Conrad, along with other political leaders, raised an army of about 80,000 men. The outbreak took the form of a war and lasted for eight months. But
eventually Poland could not cope up with the mighty power of Russia and suffered defeat. The defeat was also partly due to the flagrant inequality in Polish society with its group conflicts and internal disensions.

The suppression of the insurrection led to widespread repressive measures. Russia calculatedly set out to destroy the identity of Poland. Censorship, conscription, restriction against Roman Catholics, dispersion of the Polish soldiers into the Russian army -- all these followed the great defeat of 1830-31. To avoid Russian oppression and compulsory conscription into the Russian army, the Poles started migrating to the neighbouring countries. Yet paradoxically, the Russians in their impatience to stamp out Polish nationality only intensified it. As Russia was going ahead with its measures of repression, Poland prepared for another round of insurrections. Jocelyn Baines has captured the mood of the patriotic Poles when he observed: "As to political activity, it was almost inevitable for any patriotic Pole to become involved in this as long as the nation was forcibly divided and dominated by foreign powers."²

During the Crimean war, with Russia occupied with England and Turkey, Polish hope rose again. Apollo himself was stirred to action and organised the peasants of Podolia and Ukraine. They put up a brave fight but that was all. Once again Poland's agonies failed to strike a sympathetic cord in the minds of European powers and its fortune became marginal to more important matters in the Treaty of Paris. Poland was, as it were, destined to remain yoked to great powers. Conrad voices the same sentiment of Poland's fate as a loser when he writes to Garnett:

You remember always that I am a Slav (it's your idee fixe) but you seem to forget that I am a Pole. You forget that we have been used to go to battles without illusions. It's you Britishers that "go in to win" only. We have been "going in" these last hundred years repeatedly, to be knocked on the head only— as was visible to any calm intellect.

Apollo left his estate at Berdichew and went to Zhitomir, a short distance off. He wished to turn his literary gifts to some profit. But along with his literary interest, he immersed himself in the outbursts of anger, clandestine plotting and counter-plotting. By this time his attention was drawn to Warsaw which had turned into a hotbed of radical activity.

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and groups of revolutionary youths and patriots moved into the city to participate in some kind of underground activities. In May 1861, Apollo reached Warsaw with the ostensible purpose of starting a literary paper to be called *Fortnightly Review*. His activities culminated in the unfortunate insurrection that broke out in Warsaw on January 22, 1863, in which ironically enough, Apollo could not take part as he had already been arrested three months before. Apollo was charged with a broad range of crimes and his wife was also co-accused at the military tribunal. He was sentenced to exile to a distant Russian province Vologda and his wife Ewa also decided to accompany him.

Ewa's determination to accompany her husband in his exile and confinement was a crucial decision that had profound impact on Conrad's life. He had to grow up in an atmosphere of despair, disease and claustrophobia. Matters of poor health, of waning energies, of constant illness seemed to have become an indelible part of Conrad's early memories and even in his later life, the events of his early life continued to cast their long shadows. As Frederick Karl points out:

Conrad's psychological expectations were
set at this time. He had discovered a frame of reference in which illness created a number of responses and fulfilled a variety of needs, not the least of which was its utilisation as an attention-getting device.

Ewa breathed her last on April 6, 1865. After her death Conrad was thrown into a life deprived of his mother and in the company of a father already ill and often sunk in gloomy silence. He had none to talk to, no children to play with and the tension in the atmosphere that had surrounded him from his birth reached its limit. The circumstances of his life brought home to him ideas that rarely come to the children of his age -- ideas of death, liberty and love that were to colour his thoughts for the years to come.

The painful isolation that the boy Conrad was thrown into had had far-reaching implications. Being totally shut out from the external world and being deprived of any sympathetic channel of communication, his eyes turned inward: "I don't know what would have become of me if I had not been a reading boy," muses Conrad in his *A Personal Record*, and in most of

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his novels we find long, brooding passages of introspection. The question of isolation and alienation -- physical and psychological, occupies him in most of his novels. In *Almayer's Folly*, we find it in Nina's case; in *An Outcast of the Islands*, it is found in case of Willems; in Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*; in Lord Jim in the novel of that name; in Razumov of *Under Western Eyes*, to mention only the most conspicuous cases. Indeed, the memory of the days spent with his father in exile and confinement seemed to have become so deep-seated that we find him constantly exploring parent-child relationships with reference to their cultural and political environments.

The sorrows and sufferings of his boyhood, the continuous tension and uncertainty had also some positive effects and they had a creative influence on his life and thoughts as a novelist. Destined to lead a marginal life as a boy, he enacted the same role of marginality throughout his life. As a seaman he opted for a separate world, a microcosm with its own discipline, its own value-system. As a writer also, he subjected himself to the same marginality, first, because of the extremely uncertain nature of his profession and second, because of his choice
of a limited circle of friends and acquaintances. Forced into a life of illness, disillusionment and frustration, he evolved his own attitude towards life and its different aspects. He had had a world of experience from which he churned out a few ideals for himself which, according to him, imparted to his life a certain meaning. These ideals are -- the principles of fidelity, liberty and loyalty. He had been adequately schooled on the crucible of these ideals. Later in life he was to declare:

Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably among others, on the idea of fidelity.  

His experience with his father must have also made some deep impressions in his mind about the processes of the struggle against oppression and despotism and deepened his political insight. The futility of all the noble ideals which his parents aspired to and the lesson borne by their moral and physical disintegration could not have been lost on him. He became painfully aware of the fact that

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6 Joseph Conrad, 'A Familiar Preface', A Personal Record, p.XXI.
individuals do not carve out their destiny; they are subject to circumstances — circumstances that are set and defined by the nature and limitations of the omnipotent state and the cultural and political enlightenment of the people. Conrad's major novels leave no doubt that he considered human identity to be a social construction and that the individual's life has its real basis in the political nature and cultural maturity of the community of which the individual is a part. Moreover, his intense personal experiences with the forces of oppression and despotism enriched his sensibility and helped him to reach a vantage point from which he could judge things wisely and dispassionately. It is from this vantage point that he located the failure of the Polish people to their "political immaturity" much as the failure of the people of Costaguana in *Nostromo*. If we keep these factors in view, Conrad's later shying away from active politics does not seem so paradoxical as some Conrad scholars tend to feel. In fact one critic seems to have come closer to the truth when he points out:

One reason why Conrad eschewed politics
in later life was his awareness of its
destructive powers: first it seduces and then it discards, having in the process distorted truth and thwarted hope. If he glanced backward, he could note only national disaster and personal tragedy.

From his birth till the death of his father, Conrad was the victim of a situation which was determined by the political conditions of Poland and the convictions and commitment of his parents. He was absolutely alien to the usual life of a boy of his age. His experiences were also very intense and unusual. He became an introvert -- excitable, irascible and taciturn and remained so throughout his life. He also, slowly and gradually, became a sceptic having no great reverence for religion or the comforting certitudes offered by any ideology -- political, cultural and metaphysical. Referring to the time immediately before his father's death, Conrad wrote in his essay 'Poland Revisited':

I looked forward to what was coming with an incredulous terror. I turned my eyes from it sometimes with success, and yet all the time I had an awful sensation of the inevitable. I had also moments of revolt which stripped off me some of my simple trust in the government of the universe.8

All his writings are permeated by a pervasive sense of scepticism. It is this attitude that made him reject Polish Romanticism as the idealism of the foolhardy and seriously question English and Swiss democracies for allowing individual slackness and mob rule. "In between, where Conrad tried to locate himself, was the quicksand of illusions, belief in self, the existential choice of variety, a sense of professionalism and individual commitment."  

The cultural aspects of Conrad's works have received little attention so far. Yet he was a writer intensely preoccupied with questions of cultural heritage and cultural crises. As a wanderer among cultures, Conrad has his aesthetic descendents in writers like Graham Greene and V.S. Naipaul, both of whom expressed their debt to him in unqualified terms. As an expatriate writer, Conrad had to discover his moorings in England much as V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and a host of others are doing today. But right up to the end of his life, he could not integrate himself fully to the English society. The tension in his mind became all the more acute when

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fellow writers and critics dubbed him as a Slav who brought to bear on his art a peculiarly Slav potentiality of analysing the intricacies of the human mind. Dostoevsky, whom he loathed, was referred to as his literary predecessor. This occasioned several unusually sharp denials from Conrad in his letters and auto-biographical writings. He vehemently denied being a Slav and the culture of Poland being a Slav culture. It is significant to note that quite a few of his novels deal with the dichotomy and tension between different cultures -- Western and Eastern, Slav and European.

Conrad was born and brought up in a Poland rent with political and cultural schism. The victorious powers wanted to impose their own language and culture on the Polish people. The Polish language and culture were tainted insufferably by this intrusion of alien elements. The total Russification of Poland was undertaken successively by a number of Tsars and in most cases, the slight resistance on the part of the Polish people brought in its wake measures of suppression and oppression by the despotic emperors. Later in life, Conrad found the same forces of oppression and suppression operating, albeit in
different forms, in the Far East, Africa and Latin America. In his imagination the fate of Poland became a parable of the political and economic exploitation and cultural denudation of native people by conquering races in a large part of the world. The European colonists and conquerors went to the Far East and Africa for the purposes of trade and establishing colonies. They came in contact with the native societies and native cultures in different capacities. Through this contact and intermingling, the primitive cultures of the native communities underwent significant changes. The Europeans influenced the natives a great deal and were, in turn, influenced by them. This brought about a phenomenon of curious cultural interaction.

For a writer, Conrad's background and upbringing were unique. He had been exposed to a broad spectrum of beliefs, intellectual currents and cross-currents of the time. During his stay in France and later in the service of the British Merchant Navy in the Far East and in Congo, he moved among people of different shades of opinion and entered into their activities, not for ideological reasons (as he makes abundantly clear in The Arrow of Gold) but for the sake
of experience itself. His maritime career which led him to distant seas and continents provided him with an excellent opportunity to establish some direct acquaintance with the mode of life of the people of those lands. He could observe from close quarters how the different political ideologies -- imperialism, colonialism and democracy are practiced and the cultural task of civilising native people are carried out. Eventually when he became a writer he could safely draw on his heavily-stored repertoire of observations and experiences which, no doubt, were adequately supplemented by assiduous study of those lands and people.

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