

**Isolation and Loneliness in Modern Fiction
- A Study Of Conrad's *Chance* -**

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ABSTRACT

The world has changed during the twentieth century on. It becomes rich in every side of life: the economic, the cultural, the social, the political, the medical, the commercial, and above all the aesthetic side. But man's spiritual state becomes worse every day. Feeling alone and isolated are the dominant emotions inside the modern man. Thus the theme of isolation and loneliness is a common theme in modern fiction.

This study tries to explore the theme of isolation as a universal state of the modern man, especially the modern novelist. It is divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section one deals with the theme of isolation in some works of modern fiction especially by Conrad whose works are manifestations of his feeling as a lonely outcast in the world.

Section two handles the theme of isolation in Conrad's *Chance*. This novel was chosen because almost all the main characters feel that they are estranged from each other to great.

The paper ends with the conclusion which sums up the findings of this study.

1.1. Isolation in Modern Fiction

The modern life is what the modern writers try to map. It is obvious that loneliness and isolation are two of the most common themes of modern fiction because both control the psyche of

modern man. Man becomes an isolated being either because of himself or because of his society or because of both. However, some novelists consider themselves outcasts in the world. Conrad's life was not easy, that is why he drew this in his works.

Elizabeth Drew argues that revealing the characters differs in modern novel from that in the novels of the previous ages. Tom Jones in Defoe's *Tom Jones* is more type than individual. Moreover, he is surrounded by a richness of social setting and his character is interpreted so fully by his creator. The modern character is different from such characters as Tom Jones. The characters of modern novelists such as Conrad, Lawrence, and Joyce are isolated from their fellows. These heroes struggle toward some individual self-fulfillment outside their societies. They are presented to the reader in some unfamiliar method of self revelation (Drew: 20).

Daiches believes that since the past is stored in one's mind and influences the present then this leads to emphasis on the individual's loneliness. He suggests that the gestures made by an individual to try to communicate with others are not sufficient to convey himself to the public. He says that since these gestures are public they are bound to be falsified. They are for some extent misunderstood because each person reads them according to his own private history:

Every man is the prisoner of his own private consciousness, his unique train of association, which results in turn from his own unique past.... Loneliness is seen as the necessary condition of man. Yet the desire to communicate is also a deeply imbedded human instinct, and the desire to escape from loneliness one of the chief human preoccupations. (Daiches: 8)

The following are examples, among many others, which depicts man's isolation from his surroundings and the world. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* Leopold Bloom is alienated from the world.

Gillie suggests that the senses of alienation, estrangement, and loss are common in Joyce's works. He himself was a detached person who believed that only the artist " can achieve the necessary detachment to give back to the people a true image of itself" (Gillie: 99).

Virginia Woolf lived in male controlling society. Her father, Leslie Stephen, was an example of the Victorian radicals who did not value the role of women in society. Her work reveals a talent of depicting the psychological motives of her characters (Ibid.: 101). Mrs. Gaveston in *A Family and a Fortune* is a good weak women who lives by her feelings. She is a lonely women though she has a family (Ibid.: 108).

Also, Mrs. Dalloway in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* searches for means of communication with others. She makes a party in which the climax occurs. Though people gather in such events as parties, ironically people are lonelier in a crowd. Mrs. Dalloway tries to find ways of establishing real contact with others. She refuses Welsh's proposal for marriage, though she loves him, because he wants to dominate her personality. However, she accepts a husband who gives her more freedom. Yet this freedom also suggests loneliness. She starts to imagine herself imprisoned in a tower cut off from the cheerful conversation and activities of the people outside. She begins to wonder whether after death all people come together or not (Daiches: 9_10).

In fact the modern age is the age of development and inventions. It is the age of new ideas, thoughts, ideologies, and philosophies. Many scientists, critics, and other men of knowledge have brought to the world new things to make it more brilliant and comfortable, to make it prosperous and happy. But all those creative inventions and ideas unfortunately, have complicated life. Those

new thoughts alienated people. People have become more detached from each other.

Most of the modern novelists who live with the pain of being in a world of misunderstanding and miscommunication are successful at depicting the modern man's isolation. As a matter of fact being in loneliness is the product of man's difficult life: wars, colonialism, famines, diseases, pollution, and the increase in mortality rates. Conrad was one of the people who faced the feeling of being foreign and lost. Conrad felt that he was an outcast in life. Then he portrayed the theme of moral and social isolation in a special way in his works.

1.2. Isolation in Joseph Conrad's Works

The theme of isolation is well drawn in Conrad's major works. His characters are lost, detached and they suffer from their inability to find a place in their own society (Stewart: 77_9). Most of Conrad's characters choose their isolation. They prefer to live alone instead of living in unfriendly society. They like to be abandoned by the whole world and to live on isolated places. These characters flee to loneliness to escape the evils of society.

Ian Watt in his essay "Joseph Conrad: Alienation and Commitment" discusses the meaning of the word *alienation* as used widely by the modern writers. It has many meanings and suggestions among which is estrangement. In his opinion Conrad is among the writers who embodied the theme of alienation largely in his work:

all his writings, and especially his letters, make it clear not only that his mind completely rejected the social and intellectual order of the day, but that his whole inner being seemed to have been deprived of meaning. There can surely be few expressions of such

total estrangement from the natural world, from other people, from the writing process, and from the self. (Watt: 6)

Martin Decoud in *Nostromo* is a foreigner, a sophisticated Parisian journalist. He becomes involved in Costaguanan politics because he loves Don Jose's daughter. Decoud makes cynical comments on the ambitions and professions of Costaguanan politicians of the two opposite sides. However, when he finds himself alone on a deserted island with a load of silver which he and Nostromo have been commissioned to save from the rebels, "he finds his loneliness unsupported by any idealistic beliefs, unsupportable" (Daiches: 45). Decoud commits suicide because he cannot face the nothingness of his own isolated self. He finds that this nothingness is intolerable (Ibid.: 46).

Conrad is among the best modern novelists who handled the theme of loneliness in a fantastic way. Elizabeth Drew suggests that Conrad brought a new vision into English fiction. The novels of the previous ages are concerned with man and woman in society. Drew says that the main characters are "deeply imbedded in traditional social and moral systems, and these codes govern their lives, which are lived among like-thinking people" (Drew: 156).

F.R. Leavis assumes that *Under Western Eyes* must be counted as one of the great English masterpieces. He says that it is related to *The Secret Agent*. Both deal with the theme of isolation. The Verlocs in *The Secret Agent* are strangers to each other. In *Under Western Eyes* the theme of isolation is presented by the case of the Russian student Razumov. He is lonely and has no parents. His prospects are destroyed when Haldin, a student revolutionist hides in Razumov's rooms. From that moment he is doomed to endure a trapped and tormented conscience in complete loneliness (Leavis: 242_3).

In the case of Razumov it is not the usual feeling of loneliness. It almost drives him mad. He wants to give up Haldin but he is already involved (Ibid.: 243). Most of the estranged characters suffer from their disability to establish new bases for agreement and understanding. Even if it happens and they make acquaintance they tend to know persons who are like themselves alienated outcasts.

2.1. Flora de Barral: An Outcast

Chance differs from Conrad's other works that is it talks about a socially isolated woman who finds no way to get rid from her detachment only through herself. Flora de Barral as a child is unhappy. Her mother dies while her father, a financier, is busy in his work. After her bankrupt father is imprisoned, she finds that she has no right or a good place in society. She struggles since the age of sixteen to achieve some dignity and happiness. When her father loses his money and the money trusted to him by many people, everybody has forsaken her and become unjust to her.

Flora's governess turns to be the most cruel creature in Flora's life. When she knows that Mr. de Barral is bankrupt she goes with cold blood to attack the innocent young lady. Flora insinuates that something is wrong. She loses her sense of security. Marlow, the narrator, comments on her situation at that time:

You may imagine then the force of the shock in the intuitive perception not merely of danger, for she did not know what was alarming her, but in the sense of the security being gone. And not only security.*

* Joseph Conrad, *Chance*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008, P. 91(Henceforth will be parenthetically cited within text as Ch. followed by page number).

Oliver Warner suggests that the theme of *Chance* has nothing to do with its title. The central theme is that of moral isolation. He explains how the governess's attitudes towards Flora has the greatest bad effect upon her personality. The brutal attitude of the governess gives Flora a feeling of being utterly unwanted. Her relatives and relationship with the Fynes do not make it better. On the contrary people around her deepen her isolation. Flora has indeed has an ugly pilgrimage (Warner: 161).

Stewart numerates the ideas covered by *Chance*. Among the principal themes are alienation, solitude, and duplicity of idealism (Stewart: 213). There is what may be called confused values in Flora's world as Allan Simmons puts it in his essay "*Latter Novels*". Carleon Anthony is a poet-tyrant, de Barral is a financier-convict, Roderick Anthony is paralysed emotionally and sexually, and the Fynes who themselves eloped look at Flora's elopement as sheer lunacy (Simmons: 261). The duplicity of the social values enforces Flora's detachment more and more. It makes her alienated from the whole world. She is unable to communicate herself to anyone. She looks and listens but rarely speaks.

Marlow points out that Flora's continuous silence seems everlasting. She rarely speaks or expresses her feelings. From the very beginning of his encounter with her story, Marlow wonders at her capacity to make no response to any attack towards her. This is the cruel governess calls her names and she makes no response to defend herself:

Even when she was asked violently whether she imagined that there was anything in her, apart from her money, to induce any intelligent person to take any sort of interest in her existence, she only caught her breath in one dry sob and said nothing, made no other sound, made no movement. When she was viciously assured that she was in heart, mind, manner and appearance, an utterly

common and insipid creature, she remains still, without indignation, without anger. (Ch.: 93)

In a Conradian work, people seem to escape their won societies or social status to establish new worlds and to seek peace outside their homes. C. B. Cox says that *Chance* deals with outcasts who try to form a paradise outside the conventions of society. Anthony runs away to sea from the tyranny of his sentimental romantic father, the poet Carleon Anthony. Flora suffers from the burden of being the daughter of a financial criminal and unmerciful relatives (Cox: 120).

Living by oneself is horrible but sometimes it is better than accompanying people who increase one's feeling of detachment and alienation. When Flora joins a German family is one of her worse experiences because they do not have common grounds and living with this is merely a way to escape from her terrible relatives. Marlow describes her life at that time.

At last, Flora meets a good- hearted navy captain, Roderick Anthony, the son of the poet and the brother of Mrs. Fyne Flora's friend and acquaintance. Their relationship faces harsh difficulties and cruel interferences from different people. Osborn Andreas affirms that both feel unloved and rejected in childhood and they accept the belief of being socially unwanted. This common ground brings them together into marriage. (Andreas: 153).

Anthony is aware that he represents a chance for Flora to get rid of her loneliness:

I am the man to take you away from them; that is, if you are not afraid. You told me you had no friends. Neither have I. Nobody ever cared for me as far as I can remember. Perhaps you could. Yes, I live on the sea. But who would you be parting from? No one. You have no one belonging to you. (Ch.: 168)

In fact, Flora and Anthony's conviction of their own unlovableness causes them to estrange themselves away from each other (Andreas: 153). Throughout the parts which talk about Flora and Anthony there is an overwhelming feeling that their relationship is the outcome of their special circumstances. Flora feels that Roderick pities her rather than truly loves her, whereas he thinks that she does not love him the sort of love a man needs. He bases his assumption upon what Mr. Fyne tells him about the reality of her love. Marlow wonders at the causes behind the coldness of their relationship:

What could they have found to estrange them from each other with this rapidity and this thoroughness so far from all temptations, in the peace of the sea and in an isolation so complete. (Ch.: 243)

As far as it is possible Conrad made his principal characters in *Chance* profoundly isolated. Flora is saved from despair only because she cannot understand what has happened to her. Captain Anthony's life is a life of solitude and silence. R. A. Gecoski says that there are parallels between *Chance* and *Under Western Eyes*. Razumov almost goes mad with isolation. But he can escape this terrible isolation only through the experience of love. Problems between the lovers are caused by misunderstanding. Flora and Anthony are separated because there is a misunderstanding between them (Gecoski: 173_5).

Mr. de Barral's dilemma dishonours his daughter. As the daughter of a convict Flora is treated badly wherever she goes. Also, she is attacked because of the others' jealousy. However Anthony comes to rescue her from her predicament. In reality he loves her. He wants to save her from the social captivity. He understands her situation and even he becomes angry when he knows that it deprived her from her name. When he meets her he hears the Fynes,

his sister and her husband where Flora seeks refuge with them, call her Miss Smith. Anthony does not accept it: " the scoundrels_ whoever they are, men or women, seem to have robbed you of your very name" (Ch.: 169).

Walter F. Wright explains that Anthony's entrance into Flora's life changes it from dejection to enthusiasm. The power of his kindness releases her encaged self like the freeing of a soul from evil enchantment (Wright: 34). Anthony receives Flora and her father after his release from prison on his ship. But, the captain's estrangement increased as the father tries hard to separate them. Barral's attempts are foolish but dangerous; they poison their minds and disturb the balance of their married life. However things come to stability only when Barral dies killed by the same death cup put by himself to Anthony.

The most painful action in *Chance* is Anthony's death. Unfortunately, when finally things between the two put into order after the death of the abnormal father, disaster falls upon them like a lightening. Anthony dies drowning when his ship, the Ferndale, sinks after a collision with another ship. The whole crew is saved along with Flora who loses a dear husband who is her only support in life.

2.2. The Others

The interference of others in Flora and Anthony's choices makes it more difficult for both and brings some sort of misery and unrest to both. It is a feeling of dissatisfaction and uneasiness which causes more alienation and detachment from themselves and society. Mrs. Fyne does not approve the match between her brother and Flora. She assumes that it is unsuitable. She sends her husband to warn Anthony that Flora does not love him. She bases her assumption on a letter sent by Flora.

Marlow is puzzled with the real motive of Mrs. Fyne's attitude. He thinks that there is a duplicity in her action being eloped herself from her father. Also, he believes that she has some unconscious motive. In his opinion she wants to cut her relationship with her brother and his wife as:

She wanted the protest to be made....in order to make all intercourse for the future impossible. Such an action would estrange the pair for ever from the Fynes. She understood her brother and the girl too. Happy together, they would never forgive that outspoken hostility_ and should the marriage turn badly. (Ch.: 146)

At the end of the novel, Flora reveals to Marlow her motives of writing the letter sent to Mrs. Fyne. She confesses that it is childish and foolish. Simmons argues that the consequences of her letter "underscore both her personal entrapment and, more broadly, the futility of female action in the face of the forces ranged against her" (Simmons: 263). But, in a moment Anthony starts to believe Mrs. Fyne's assumption carried by her husband. It is humiliating to believe that one chooses the wrong person and that one's companion of the other sex does not really care for the beloved: "that fellow Fyne has been telling me the truth. She does not care for me a bit" (Ch.: 254).

It seems that Flora is more certain than Anthony. Nonetheless, she still feels that she is a mere worthless object of pity. However Anthony carries on his project to marry Flora at the same day of her father's release from prison. They all voyage on board the *Ferndale*. From this time on the married couple experience another sort of hostility on sea.

The crew of the *Ferndale* do not like Flora, especially Franklin, the first mate. Their hostility towards the captain's wife mostly stems from the change that has come over Anthony since his marriage. However, Flora's relationship with her husband himself is

not as good as a normal marriage relationship. There is a sexual and emotional coldness between both. Anthony's faith in Flora's love is shaken by Fyne. Thus, as Allan Simmons says, Flora only succeeds in bringing her land based cares into the sea (Simmons:262_3). Even after marriage Marlow describes Anthony's solitude as his best friend. He always wants some place where he can sit down and be alone. He "turned to the sea which had given so much of that solitude" (Ch.: 2587).

Mr. de Barral hates captain Anthony. He feels jealous of him. He regards the Ferndale as a second jail and Anthony is his new jailor (Andreas: 155). Thus the three live in hell. Flora is entrapped more in the prison of her own self. She has waited for her father to be released and now she suffers from his hostility towards her husband:

She had arrived at the very limit of her endurance as the object of Anthony's magnanimity; she was the prey of an intuitive dread of she did not know what mysterious influence; she felt herself being pushed back into that solitude, that moral loneliness, which had made all her life intolerable. (Ch.: 316)

Cox claims that de Barral is a tragic_ comic figure. He is also insane (Cox: 122). His attitude towards Anthony is grotesque. Instead of gratitude he poisons Anthony's cup. Fortunately, Powell the second mate sees him. When he discovers Barral's failed attempt, Anthony decides to let Flora go "I own myself beaten' he said in a firmer tone, 'you are free. I let you off since I must" (Ch.: 318). De Barral drinks the poisoned cup frustrated by the fact that his daughter clings to her husband and seems never to let him go. May be at that moment Flora remembers her misery when her governess shouted that she will never be loved or wanted by anyone. In fact the reader feels that the governess's big scene affects Flora greatly. It can be felt throughout the whole text,

because the dominant feeling over Flora is that she is a forsaken creature who cannot communicate herself to others.

After the death of de Barral the barriers between Flora and Anthony fall and they proceed to live a happy normal married life. Andreas says that one feels that in overcoming these barriers they have not only found each other but have also found their way back to normal relations with whatever social groups they will meet in the future. Their feeling of estrangement, non_ acceptance and captivity by others arrests their emotional development. But their need for each other has matured them (Andreas: 156).

The end of *Chance* is astonishing. Anthony dies. Perhaps some readers consider it as an unjust end. But it is how Conrad looked at things: outcasts remain outcasts till the end. However, he chose to give Flora a second chance in life. Powell proposes to the widowed Flora since he loves her and all the while he cares for her and feels that he is responsible to save her any emotional pain through different stages of their acquaintance on board the Ferndale.

CONCLUSION

The theme of loneliness and isolation is common in modern literature. But Conrad is among the best who presented cases similar to real life. *Chance* presents a lonely female character. Conrad depicts this issue in a remarkable way inside a representative of the new woman. Flora tries to find her way in life in vain. She stumbles because the other people around her do not give her the assistance needed to make her set towards the lights of a new better life after a miserable one led by her father.

Chance is a chance for the modern reader to look closely to the reality of the social relationships of the modern man. Most of those relations are false and lack depth. They are not based on agreement or understanding. They are built upon unfathomable

hatred and despise. The fate of such relations is to collapse, as the relationship between the Fyne's and Flora or between Mrs. Fyne and her brother, Anthony.

It happens that Flora and Anthony suffer from estrangement from their surroundings. They match each other perfectly. But the interference of the envious people deprive them from enjoying the company of each other. They lose the peace of soul which they needed for a long time. The people around them, like Flora's father, are unstable. Their instability affects their relationship. It makes them more and more unsettled. However, when the interference stops the couple find their rest and mutual understanding. But, Conrad ends the novel with the death of Anthony. The young captain spends his life as an outcast and dies like an outcast.

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