



**The Uncertain Task of Individuality in Joseph
Conrad's
NOSTROMO**

A Research Paper submitted

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Abstract :

This paper attempts at tackling the episode of adventure of the self for proving existence . It tests Conrad's quest to carry impressionism for a flex of sensations gazing towards the space between mental and biological death . Conrad's preface to Nostromo reflects the moral alienation for political suicide , " ... He is a Man of the People , their own unenvious force disdaining to lead but ruling from within ." Nostromo is Conrad's masterwork where his perspectives are largest , and where his essential originality in the representation of human blindness and consequent human affections , is at its strongest . Perhaps , Nostrono is the only persuasive instance of the natural sublime in the twentieth-century hero of fiction, " ... dies , betrayed , he hardly knows by what or by whom ." Nostromo , himself is the imaginative center of the book. He is unique among Conrad's personae , and no a Conradian man whom we could have expected . The centrality of vision has enabled the basic of greatness that lies in his character .Greatness has so many images in the individuality of Nostromo as the Man of the people .Critics found it easy to denote Conrad's repeated references to Nostromo as " The Man of People " . Though he is of the people , Nostromo loves leadership and reputation for making him another ideal for enhancing a pure " Homeric throwback". Thus, the function of individuality is to give permanent objective reality or truth in the sense of one's consciousness matured enough to realize that order and the future were the result of self-assertion . Conrad could test the oppression of individuality in pessimistic vision of continual uncertainty about himself . In writing Nostromo , Conrad attempts at creating art so great that he sacrifices some of Nostromo's anxiously meditations to clarify secrets of privacy and the motives of self-disguise.

1.1 Brief Background & Summary

Nostromo 1904 , is Joseph Conrad's masterwork . It is a Conradian literal hint to the virtue he liked to call " fidelity " .It is a tragedy of a post Nietzschean sort , full of illusions and self-destroyed character . Nostromo is the only persuasive instance of the natural sublime in a twentieth – century hero of fiction . Conrad sets his novel in the mining town of Sulaco , an imaginary port , in the occidental region of the imaginary country of " Costaguana " . The book has developed fully characters , but two characters dominate the narrative . Nostromo is set in the south American country of Costaguana , more specifically in that country's occidental province and its port city of Sulaco . Costaguana is a fictional nation , yet it resembles real-life of Colombia The two main characters who dominate the actions are Nostromo and Charles Gould . Nostromo has risen to his position through his bravery and daring exploits . His name is an Italian phrase means " Our Man " . Nostromo's real name is Giovanni Fidanza . He is a commanding figure in Sulaco , respected by wealthy Europeans and seemingly limitless in his abilities to command power among the local population . Accompanied by the young journalist , Martin Decoud , Nostromo sets off to smuggle the silver out of Sulaco by transporting it to a smaller lifeboat . Back in Sulaco , Nostromo gains power and fame as he daringly rides over the mountains to summon the army which ultimately saves Sulaco's powerful leaders from the revolutionaries and ushers in the independent state of Sulaco . In the meantime , Decoud loses his mind as he was left alone in the deserted island . He shoots himself as he takes the small lifeboat out to sea . The fate of Decoud is a mystery to Nostromo , which combined with the fact of the missing silver . Nostromo becomes in love with Giorgio's elder daughter , Linda , . One night he is shot and killed mistaken for a trespasser by old Giorgio . Charles Gould is a native Costaguanero of English descent who owns an important silver – mining . He is tired of the political instability in Costaguana . He uses his wealth to support Ribiera's government which he believes will finally bring stability to the country . In the time of chaos , he ordered Nostromo to take his silver off shore so it can be sold into international markets .

1.2 Conrad and the Character of Individuality

Nostromo is not only a political character as a human , although his name means "Our Man " in Italian , yet he is directly or indirectly under the pressure of circumstances essentially political or other public character ; Nostromo is a historical character and due to that appears in a crucial role of history although with a private story of his own which is no less important to Conrad because there he finds himself . So to follow the secret method of self- portrayal is another genuine interest in the study of Nostromo , " ... Conrad's self- image is traced in three characters : Nostromo , Decoud , and Charles Gould , where it is a little less descriptive than in anything else in the story ." (1)

The novel shows precisely how Nostromo , the protagonist is betrayed by himself, and by others .It is an overwhelming fiction that contains mystery of endless re-readings ; " Nostromo , to me , rewards frequent re-readings in something of the way that Othello does ; there is always surprise waiting for me . " (2)

Nostromo is the imaginative center of the book , Nostromo is the personae unique among Conrad's characters . He is " The Man of the People " . Nostromo is the most surprising act that breathes the writer's imagination whom the writer describes in a Preface;

" ... he is a Man of the people , their very own unenvious force ,

Disdaining to lead but ruling from within . Years afterwards , grown older as the Captain Fidanza , with a stake in the country, going about his many affairs followed by respectful glances in the modernized streets of Sulaco , ... "(3) Human desire roots in absolutely rational self-possession that regulates the exchange between the world and the self .Character enables the individual to make his way through the world. The identity is more certain in the course of action that character is in need to feel strongly facts of history when man is capable only of creating a personality for himself , " To Conrad it seemed as if he had to rescue himself , and , not surprisingly ,this is one of the themes of his short fiction ." (4) This is to face the terrible dilemma of allowing the selves to vanish into obscurity or undertaking to save them by compromising egoism , nothingness on one side or losing one's sense of identity into the chaotic flux of passing time .

The effort to create moments against the flood of time brought Conrad to an intimate and problematic knowledge of himself . This is to face existence to obscure events like Charles Gould in Nostromo , the victim of depressingly repetitive actions. The uncertainty of moral salvation of our own souls gives man's life a necessity for creating figurative images in the mind of the individual to shed a good deal of light on the relation existing between the mind of the individual and the whole of an imaginative process .

1.3 The Psychological Principle of Politics

Joseph Conrad uses the sea to stage the drama of man's longing for" what Jacques Lacan , in his study of Antigone , calls the state of being "Entre – Deux – Morts " " (5). The argument here will be like an oblique exploration of the death-drive , and its related motifs : guilt , fear , and the truth of man's war-pieces that present worlds poised on the edge of an abyss- a gulf- whose deadly silence maddeningly undermines only hope of command or mastery , casting shadows between the lines of generation whether historical or artistic . Psychoanalysis is needed here as a mode of thinking the consideration of subjectivity in the face of the Real after the Fall of what Lacan calls , " The wall of Semblance " , in one of these periods of crises when the vein of liberal humanism with its pretty fictions reaches a point of enthusiasm and exhaustion . What are we to make then of uncanny prose , of the curious reference to the " undiscovered country " , the phrase which , in Hamlet's soliloquy , designates death – suggesting as it does, that the truth might be a little more elusive indeed than it first seemed ? It seems crucial to a reading of such a complex piece of work in the process of the idea of transposition which stages man's desire obliquely to reach beyond the pleasure principle . Nostromo , our Man , is at once everyman and no-man , everything and nothing , the debased symbol of an ideology whose immanent meaning has drained away and betrayed an ugly gap ; " ... Ah , Yes ! True . I am nothing " , he says to Monygham , who replies , " Not at all . You are everything " . (N, P.457)

Conrad shares with his readers the idea of the conviction of Nostromo's greatness in spite of the moral ruin of self-recognition that contains many persuasive images of greatness , of a moral sublimity .Conrad portrays an image of Natural Man , of the Man of the people in which we find a vision that is possible to believe . Conrad makes repeated references to Nostromo as " the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores " , the magnificent beyond the reach of irony ,of the natural leader who disdains leadership ,and the man who loves reputation . Nostromo serves no ideal , he is a man with natural genius for command , scorns any role that may make him another Garibaldi in the name of any cause . He is a pure Homeric throwback . He enchants the populace of Sulaco , through most of all , he enchants the skeptical and enigmatic of Conrad who defends with some merely rhetorical ironies .

1.4 Egotism and Society

" Nihilism and self – destruction serve Nostromo's tragic fate . Nostromo finds himself in saying with perfect truth , " My name is known from one end of Sulaco to the other , What more can you do for me ? " (6) . Conrad swings his thoughts about Nostromo between being a victim of the " disillusioned weariness " or a victim of the " disenchanting vanity " .Thus Nostromo's tragic fate is in vanity , from nihilism , the nihilism of Decoud's waste in suicide . He is betrayed partly by Decoud's act of self – destruction , but largely by his own refusal to maintain the careless preference for glory , for making himself a hero . Moreover , to be a victim or victimized are alike for Nostromo to find triumph in believing in death-in-life because he has lost the truth of his vanity. This gives him a feeling to receive aesthetic dignity after his death.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith has argued that , " The entire problematic of value and evaluation has been evaded and explicitly exiled , in contemporary literary theory , a tendency which she attributes to the dominance of linguistic rather than sociological or economic models in literary study ." (7) The scientific study of structuralism which involved the study of how meaning was produced to the exclusion of aesthetic or moral judgment about the meaning , clearly played a role in the explicit exelling of value and evaluation .

Nostromo's birth into moral and self – awareness is therefore , ironically , synonymous with the failure of moral immanence and is directed to the power of silver . He had kept the treasure(silver) for the purpose of revenge for himself ,but at last he cared nothing of it , he cared only for (Giselle) . He would rather keep her in a palace on a hill like a jewel in a casket . What are the moral bearings we take in Nostromo ? " The answer is hard to find . The most plausible alternative to the beleaguered sentimental philosophy is the Christian /Garibaldean ethics of duty represented by Viola and his dark-haired , dutiful daughter , Linda ." (8) Even the Garibaldino's moral and faith have been destroyed slowly by political implications . Politics , treasure , and beauty with the Sublime vision of human nature , with no place for moral bearings in Nostromo's individuality .

2.1 Revolution and the Sublime of Society

Conrad's famous pessimistic remarks on human nature are qualified by a measure of hope and affection , and the efforts of mankind to work its own salvation present a sight of alarming comicality. Conrad writes in a letter to Cunningham Graham : " We can't return to nature since we can't change our place in it . Our refuge is in stupidity , in drunkenness of all kinds , in lies , in beliefs , in murder, thieving ,reforming - in negation , in contempt – each man according to the promptings of his particular devil . " (9) Conrad believes in Kantian politics of Sublimity that lies in the contradictory combination of satiric , and moral dignity . Kant assumes the picture of history in which action threatens to become farce , but human race requires that our eyes should be prevented from this undignified drama and concentrate on human moral worth . For both Conrad and Kant this sublime leaves us with the moral problem of what one must be in order to be a man . History has repeated naturally in Nostromo , as human history has faith in the moral and pessimistic politics as demonstrated powerfully in Nostromo , in ironical remarks of Decoud on Costaguanan politics ;

" ... it is screamingly funny , the blood flows all the time , and the actors believe themselves to be influencing the fateof the universe .Of course, government in general, any government anywhere , is a thing of exquisite comicality to a discerning mind but really we Spanish – Americans do overstep the bounds . No manof ordinary intelligence can take part in the intrigues of une farce macabre ." (N, p. 152) Political action of the desired revolutionary transformation can be deduced in a sense of theatrical imagery throughout Nostromo . In Nostromo , the failure of political action to be materialised is constantly offered dramatic settings . It is as if , " ... the stage is set for an absent epic action ... which fails to turn up or which swept off long ago . " (10) Sublime images serves to underscore the irony of belief that Nostromo has proved his moral and physical tenacity by a waving of moral degradation ; " it must have been terribly dark ! it was the worst darkness of the Golfo , the Capataz asserted briefly . " (N, p. 433)

2.2 Moral and Physical Suicide

The idea of suicide is resembled by Decoud on the Golfo Placido , where he sinks without a trace . For Decoud's death is one of the most somber and tragic moments in Conrad's " long dialogue with the darkness . " (11) Silence and solitude have driven him to despair that the sensible world of his life shatters into a schizophrenic succession of incomprehensible images vibrating with ; " ... senseless phrases ,always the same but utterly incomprehensible , about Nostromo , Antonio , Barrios , and proclamations mingled into an ironical and senseless buzzing. " (N, p. 499)

Here Conrad takes the theme of moral alienation to an extreme which culminates in an act of moral suicide ; here man has no other means of withstanding the power of nature than to anticipate her of all sensuous interest to kill himself morally before physical force does it . Decoud's moral self-immolation is also a political suicide that he reinforces the association of the skeptical journalist's fate with the suicidal unraveling of the history in the days preceding his death he has ; " ... the first moral sentiment of his manhood " . (N, p. 498)

That his suicide is the most profound and decisive moral gesture he makes . Decoud's suicide on the Golfo Placido , sinking , swallowed up in the immense indifference of things without leaving a trace .Another kind of suicide is the moral suicide , it is the theme of moral alienation in a version of the sublime .

The self-reflexive interplay between the sublimity of nature and ideology is made similarly explicit in Decoud's earlier loss of consciousness during the attempted act of historical representation . The image of the fifty years of dictatorship in Costaguana becomes a self-reflexive mirror image at the thematic level of Conrad's formal strategies of narrative dislocation in the novel . Nostromo's tragic fate is the fulfillment of his desperate grandeur which Conrad cannot dismiss as mere vanity despite all his own skepticism . Nostromo is betrayed partly by Decoud's act of self-destruction, but mainly and deeply by his own refusal to maintain the careless preference for glory over gain . Conrad supposes the parallel contact upon both Decoud and Nostromo as ;

" ... A victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution intend out to intellectual audacity ; the brilliant Don Martin Decoud , ... The Magnificent Capataz de Cargadores , victim of the disenchanting vanity which is the record of audacious action sat in the weary pose of a hunted outcast ... " (Nostromo , end of chapter Ten , Part 3 "The Lighthouse)

Conrad seems to be swayed between choosing Nostromo to be a victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the product of intellectual audacity or a victim of the disenchanting vanity which is the reward of audacious action. Here we are with the equality of the action to be victimized alike whether intellectual or manificent man . This is the irony that reward and punishment became assimilated to one another . It is the higher fate of the disenchanting vanity than a disillusioned weariness only that because initial enchantment is a nobler state than an initial illusion . Decoud dies because he cannot bear solitude , so he couldn't live by himself . On the other hand , Nostromo finds death-in-life , and image of Nostromo to find himself powerful and in a state of triumph to survive him and persuade the reader that even the self-betrayed hero retains an aesthetic dignity that renders his death tragically . Without a trace , Decoud dies a nihilistic death disappearing , swallowed up in the immense indifference of things , but Nostromo beyond all irony after his death receives an aesthetic tribute as in the closing paragraph of the novel ;

" ... it was another of Nostromo's triumphs , the greatest , the most enviable , the most sinister of all . In that true cry of undying passion that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon , ... " (N, the closing paragraph)

2.3 Politics and Democracy

In Nostromo , we are constantly offered dramatic settings for political action which fails to materialize . It seems as if the stage is set for an absence of epical action which fails to turn up or which swept off long ago . The narration does not flow , it coils and moves in a circular way through a configuration of still centers not fully narrated from the inside . The opening description of Sulaco , for example , suggests an amphitheatre awaiting a performance ;

" ... Sulaco had found an inviolable sanctuary ... in the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido as if within an enormous semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean , with its walls of lofty mountains hung , with the mourning draperies of cloud ." (N, p.3) Sulaco's history and future as the (Treasure – House of the World) stands out romantically as a travesty of the philosophical historian's beautifully framed , teleological narratives , dominated by the forces of blind chance . The picturesque view of things which conflates political and imaginative vision , words and deeds are associated to a greater or lesser degree with all the characters , not only with the self-appointed historian , Mitchell as the optimistic narrative . The sentimental Emilia Gould observes her husband's growing ideological abstraction with dread , so she responds imaginatively and sympathetically to Nostromo, whose sensuous and picturesque identity gives him an equally seductive power within the people .

Conrad is radically committed to the individualism of a democratic system , but gently skeptical about the dictatorship of majority rule . Conrad's skepticism grows more satirical as the rule moves toward autocratic and revolutionary movements ; " Nostromo dramatizes the problem of Corruption of political and economic idealism as issues of Nostromo is an organized self-blinding that we can absorb all the unresolved ideological disturbances which Conrad preferred not to see. The novel engages in a fruitless search for events and their origins that from their symbolic representations that it is impossible to locate among the shadows . Nostromo struggles to reflect the elusiveness by the mirage of solidity and by the fantasy of real Costaguanan history as the general horizon of political reflection . Nostromo adopts the strategy of containment based on the game of auto-reference that it leaves the space of actual historical reference blank . Nostromo turns back to its beginning as a novel , to the illusory assumption of reality and reveals itself to be no more than a record of a fictional self-reflection . The novel offers up numerous heroic pretenders to Nostromo , all the way from the savagely grotesque General Montero of the ; " ... imbecile

and domineering stare " (N , p. 111) , to the sadly pathetic and melancholy president – Dictator "Don Vincente Ribiera ;" Obese to the point of infirmity " (N, p. 108) . These characters can be easily dismissed as the real men of destiny in the novel , Charles Gould and Nostromo , linked by Conrad in a plain way as victims of Costaguanan history .

2.4 The Theme of Moral Alienation in the Task of Individual The narration in Nostromo is complex and flows in such a coiled and trembling style , and finds its way through the center and comes out from the inside ; " ... it coils and eddies through a configuration of still centres , congealed settings for action which , if recounted at all , is not fully narrated from the (inside) " (13) Sulaco, for example is described in the opening of the novel theatrically . Throughout the description later on we find signs of revolutionary action to reassure us that this is a political novel , it describes the events of the rebellion that is dematerialized by the sublime indifference of the mountain backdrop ; the mountain's " Colossal embodiment of silence " around which the "Horsemen galloped towards each other , wheeled round together , separated at speed . Giorgio saw one fall , rider and horse disappearing as if they had galloped into a chasm , and the movements of the animated scene were like the passages of a violent game played upon the plain by dwarfs mounted and on foot , yelling with tiny throats , under the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence ." (N, pp. 26 – 27) The romantic conception of Sulaco's future as the " Treasure – House of the World " , stands out as a travesty of the philosophical narratives which fail to account for the forces of blind chance . Thus , the picturesque view of the individuals towards things reflects political and imaginative vision ; reading and seeing , words and deeds , is associated with the optimistic narrative of the self – appointed historian , Mitchell. Pedrito Montero has the ability to read and fill his head with absurd visions . The ideology of material interests of the capitalist of Sulaco responds imaginatively and sympathetically to Nostromo whose identical sense gives him an equally seductive power within the people. The function of individuality is to give permanent objective reality or truth in the sense of one's consciousness matured enough to realize that order and the future were the result of self – assertion . Conrad could test the oppression of individuality in pessimistic vision of a continual uncertainty about himself . Conrad could not hide his fears for individuality to define if truth required pretense and the lack of respect for mechanical character that becomes too much of good thing .

3.3 Conclusion

This study is using Ethical Criticism of politics to treat the position of the individual in society through shedding light on the following considerations ; Egotism and Society , Hope and Salvation , Democracy and Human Morality , The theme of Moral Alienation , Moral Suicide , and , The Ideology of the beautiful Political Considerations . These bits of researches uncover some important matters about the reality of the task of individuality in society . There used to be a serious long struggle between good and evil , treasure and poverty , Democracy and Dictatorship . The question here is rhetorical ; Why has the events gone wrong ? This is bound to cause chaos in the life of society . In writing Nostromo , Conrad attempts at creating art so great that he sacrifices some of Nostromo's anxiously meditations to clarify secrets of privacy and the motives of self – disguise .

Notes

- (1) R.N. Sarkar , A Critical Study of Joseph Conrad : The Personality Behind Principle (New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers, 1993) . P. 78
- (2) Harold Bloom , Novelists and Novels : Collection of Critical Essays (New York : Checkmark Books , 2005) , P. 214
- (3) Preface to Nostromo in Novelists and Novels . P. 214
- (4) Edward W. Said , Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography (New York : Columbia University Press ,2008) , P. 12
- (5) Josiane Paccaud – Huguet , " Reading Shadow into Lines : Conrad With Lacan " in Conrad and Theory , Andrew Gibson and Robert Hampson (eds.) (Amsterdam :Allan Simmons , 1998), pp. 147-148
- (7) Barbara Herrenstein Smith , Contingencies of Value : Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory , (Cambridge : Mass and London ; Harvard University Press , 1988) , pp. 17-18
- (8) Conrad and Theory , p. 37
- (9) Sandra Dodson , " Conrad and Politics of the Sublime " in Conrad and Theory , pp.26-27
- (10) Jim Reilly , Shadow Time : History and Representation in Hardy , Conrad , and George Eliot (London : Routledge ,1993) , p. 157

- (11) J. Hillis Miller , Poets of Reality : Six Twentieth Century Writers , (Cambridge : The Belknap press of Harvard University , 1965) , p.39
- (12) Theodore Billy & Leonard Orr (eds.) , A Joseph Conrad Companion , (Greenwood : Greenwood Publishing Group , 1999) , p.139
- (13) Kiernan Ryan , " Revolution and Repression in Conrad's Nostromo " , in The uses of Fiction : Essays on the Modern Novel in Honor of Arnold Kettle ,Douglas Jefferson & Graham Martin (eds.) (Milton Keynes : Open University Press ,1982) , p. 167

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