UNIT 13: JOSEPH CONRAD: *LORD JIM* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.3.1 Major Themes
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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the emergent themes of the text
- identity some of the important characters
- discuss the experimental narrative style of Conrad
- critically analyse the novel

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is a continuation of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*. In the previous unit, we have learnt that Joseph Conrad was an English novelist and short story writer of Polish origin. Conrad was one of the precursors of the Modern age in English literature. The distinctive characteristics of his works are the presence of an underlying tone of existential pessimism and an intense engagement with the psychological world of the characters. By now, you are already familiar with the novel as we have discussed its context and presented the summary. This unit shall provide you critical commentary

on the novel, which includes a discussion of the major themes and characters. You shall be acquainted with the style of Conrad who is known for his experimental narrative style. The unit shall also throw light on the history of the critical reception of the novel.

13.3 READING THE NOVEL

Lord Jim, the novel by Joseph Conrad was originally published as a serial in Blackwood's Magazine from October 1899 to November 1900. Lord Jim was initially conceived by Conrad as a short story named "Tuan Jim–A Sketch" in 1898, based upon the then scandalous episode of the pilgrim ship Jeddah's abandonment by her English crew in August 1880. You should note that much of Conrad's works has an autobiographical element as well as a cosmopolitan character. His experiences at sea often get reflected in the nautical settings of many of his novels. A spirit of pessimism pervades Conrad's novels which depict trials of the human spirit in the midst of an indifferent universe. These basic characteristics of Conrad's writings can be found in *Lord Jim* as well. The following subsections shall enable you to approach the novel in terms of its other aspects like themes, characters, etc.

13.3.1 Major Themes

The following are the important themes implicit in the novel *Lord Jim.*

Theme of the Common Man :

Marlow often in the course of his narration refers to Jim as 'one of us'. Although the phrase could have multiple implications, in one sense it suggests Jim's being just another member of 'us' the groundlings. Conrad's vision was dominated by the characteristic despair of the Victorian period when advances in the spheres of biology, geology, physics and chemistry as well as industrialisation had only come to prove that the universe, after all, was the accidental result of physical processes and not the eternal creation of God's grand design. Neither did man's existence have a divine purpose.

Jim, whose surname is never mentioned throughout the novel, is a representative of man in his ordinary existence, his struggle to survive. He is not a hero, but an ordinary human, unable to always live up to ideals. Conrad's works mostly depict anti-heroic characters.

In the face of this meaninglessness of life and the universe, man's consciousness becomes his biggest curse. The need to find a meaning, some sense in it all becomes man's burden. Jim has an urge to rise above his ordinariness, to find honour and glory as and when he can. This is the reason why Jim has been called a romantic. Jim's choice of a vocation on the sea was based upon "a course of light holiday literature". It is Stein who calls Jim a romantic. Stein is in turn is called a romantic by Marlow. In fact all three of them – Jim, Marlow and Stein are romantics and it is one of the primary foundations of their solidarity.

The story of Jim's pursuit of glory is manifested in the novel through the metaphor of the leap. There are several occasions of leaping in *Lord Jim*. The first leap is the one Jim is too late in taking, thus losing the opportunity to achieve personal glory and respect. The second time Jim does take the leap, but although partially involuntary, it was an act of cowardiceand it only lands him in guilt, shame and lifelong misery. Jim's final leap, however, does fetch Jim his coveted moment of glory. With the figurative leap into Patusan and the literal flying leaps over the Rajah's prison wall and the creek, Jim finally wins his dreams and turns into a hero.

Theme of Isolation :

Lord Jim: A Tale has adopted as its epigraph the following lines by the German Romantic poet Novalis:

"It is certain my Conviction gains infinitely,

The moment another soul will believe in it."

Conrad's novels depict the essential isolation of human beings and the terror involved in that isolation. In *Lord Jim*, it becomes evident in the narrative technique itself. The complex, multi-layered and fragmentary narrative through which Jim's story is told suggests

the rough edges through which any human being must be known. It is significant that nowhere in the novel is Jim's last name revealed. Very little information is provided about Jim's family and he remains cut off from them, although voluntarily in part. The sense of isolation pervading the novel is also a reflection of the Victorian sense of man's essential loneliness and vulnerability in the midst of an indifferent and uncertain universe.

The only respite for man from this engulfing loneliness seems to be in human bonding and companionship. A long list of characters from Chester, Denver, Egström, Stein, Doramin, Dain Waris and Marlow take a liking to him and readily offer him help at various stages. Marlow, who takes up the task of narrating Jim's story, becomes Jim's lifelong friend. Jim is able to find a close friend in Dain Waris and a lover and companion in Jewel. Thus Jim is not completely unfortunate when it comes to finding warmth and sympathy in the world of fellow humans.

Bildungsroman in *Lord Jim :*

The German term 'Bildungsroman' implies a novel of formation, education or culture. Basically, a bildungsroman is a novel of formation, novel of education, or coming-of-age story. It is a literary genre which deals with the process of the protagonist's gradual attainment of psychological and moral maturity. Novels like Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would fall into this category.

Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* too displays characteristics of the bildungsroman. The novel narrates the story of Jim, the sensitive, young boy with romantic dreams stepping into the world in search of adventure and glory. The simple dreams with which he sets out suffer a setback when faced with the real world; experience has a withering impact on Jim's youthful idealism. The novel traces Jim's journey through the process called life, as through vicissitudes of mistakes, failures and occasional moments of success, Jim learns

the ways of life and the world. However, *Lord Jim*'s essentially tragic vision, underlying philosophical engagements and sophisticated symbolism make it more than just a story of growing up.



LET US KNOW

The Bildungsroman has many sub-genres. An *Entwicklungsroman* is a story of general growth rather than self-cultivation. An *Erziehungsroman* focuses on training and formal schooling, while a *Künstlerroman* deals with the life and growth of an artist into maturity.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How is the theme of the common man explained in the novel *Lord Jim*?

Q 2: What is a Bildungsroman?

13.3.2 Major Characters

The following is a discussion of the chief characters in *Lord Jim* :

Jim :

Lord Jim or Tuan Jim is the protagonist of the novel. As a young boy, Jim was inspired by his readings in romantic literature and adventure stories to pick the seafaring profession. Subsequently he boards a ship *Patna* carrying Malay pilgrims as first officer, abandons it along with the other officers when it shows signs of sinking after some damage in rough weather conditions. The episode turns into a scandal and haunted by his failure and stripped of his officer's certificate, Jim wanders from job to job, finally becoming the manager of a remote trading post. He falls in love with Jewel, a half-caste girl, and, by defeating a local bandit, becomes leader of the people. He meets his death in the hands of Doramin, the local chief, who shoots Jim to avenge the death of his son Dain Waris, who was also Jim's close friend.

Marlow :

Charles Marlow is the chief narrator in the novel and works as a captain on a ship. He takes a liking to Jim the very first time he sets eyes on him, in spite of his knowledge of Jim's disgraceful past and becomes his lifelong friend. He helps Jim find employment first as a water clerk and then as a trading post manager for Stein.

Stein :

Stein is the owner of a large trading post. Stein was forced to flee Europe as a young man after becoming involved in revolutionary activities. He is a thoughtful, analytical man who describes Jim as a 'romantic' to Marlow. He acts as a rescuer for Jim by sending him to Patusan, which gives Jim an opportunity to realise his romantic dreams. Stein collects butterflies and beetles as a hobby.

Gentleman Brown :

An English pirate who comes with his men to plunder Patusan. He is infamous among the locals for his villainy. He and his men are attacked upon arrival in Patusan by Dain Waris and his band, who have had advance warning of their coming. Finding himself outnumbered, he enters into negotiations with Jim and cashing in on his knowledge of Jim's past, manages to retreat safely. However, on his way back to the ship, he surprises Dain Waris and his men and kills Dain Waris, for which Jim is suspected and killed later on. Brown and his men are shipwrecked soon after. Brown is the only survivor, though he dies soon after. Marlow visits him on his deathbed and gets part of the story from him.

Captain Brierly :

Captain Brierly is one of the most decorated and respected ship's captains in the area and acts as one of the two nautical assessors at the official enquiry into the desertion of the *Patna*. He is personally tormented by Jim's humiliating trial. He offers money to Jim to help him leave Singapore and avoid the rest of the enquiry. Brierly kills himself by jumping overboard barely a week after the end of the enquiry.

Jewel :

Jewel is the woman Jim meets in Patusan and falls in love with. Jewel's mother, an educated Dutch-Malay woman, had been married to Cornelius, Jim's predecessor at Stein's trade post. After her mother's death, Jewel is oppressed by her step father Cornelius. Jim sympathises with her and protects her. She becomes his link to the insights needed to manage among Patusan affairs. Towards the end Marlow meets Jewel who provides some information regarding Jim's end. Even before parting with Jim for the last time, Jewel had apprehensions of being left by him and confronts Marlow with her fears. By the end of the novel, Jewel has turned into a muted person and leads a soundless, inert life in Stein's house.

Cornelius :

Cornelius is a Malacca-Portuguese and the previous manager of Stein's Patusan post before Jim's arrival. He is Jewel's step father and treats her abusively. He conspires with Gentleman Brown which triggers the events leading to Jim's death.

Doramin :

Doramin is Chief of the Bugis, a group of traders from Celebes who had immigrated to Patusan and a wise, kind old man. Jim gets introduced to him through Stein. Doramin saves Jim after his escape from the Rajah Allang, who had been holding him prisoner. When Dain Waris, Doramin's son gets killed by Brown, Doramin mistakes Jim to be the killer and avenges his son's death by shooting Jim. Jim lets him do so.

Dain Waris :

Dain Waris is Doramin's son and Jim's best friend. He and Jim turn out to be soul mates, and Dain Waris serves as Jim's second-in-command. He is killed when Cornelius leads Brown down the river channel behind his camp, after Jim foolishly frees Brown and his men. Later Jim is wrongly blamed for his death and killed by Doramin.

Tamb'Itam :

A Malay who had been enslaved by the Rajah Allang and rescued by Doramin. He becomes Jim's loyal servant and adviser. He gives Marlow the complete account of Jim's final days.

Rajah Allang :

Raja Allang or Tunku Allang is the corrupt, unofficial ruler of Patusan. He is the uncle of the legitimate but underage and incompetent Sultan. He tries to enforce a monopoly on trade in the area. Allang captures Jim upon his arrival in Patusan. He also secretly conspires with Gentleman Brown against Jim.

Sherif Ali :

Sherif Ali is a Muslim bandit who terrorises Patusan from a stronghold in the hills. Jim becomes a hero in Patusan after defeating Ali.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Who is the chief narrator of the novel?

Q 4: Give a brief character sketch of Jewel.

13.3.3 Narrative Style

One of the striking features of Conrad's works is his experimental narrative styles, which do not follow the conventional linear style of narration found in English fiction till the Victorian period. *Lord Jim* has a sophisticated narrative framework. Although it begins through omniscient narration, a major part of the novel is narrated in third person by one of the characters in the novel, Charles Marlow, who has been used as a narrator in two other novels and a short story authored by Conrad. Marlow narrates Jim's story to a group of listeners. Marlow's tale is also interspersed by the individual stories by other characters in the novel. The conclusion of the novel is presented in the form of a letter by Marlow received by one "privileged reader". The narration does not always follow a linear chronological

order but travels back and forth through time, providing fragmentary and often inconclusive glimpses into the events and the characters' lives. Hence, the overall picture is pieced together through a collage of accounts, observations, statements, conjectures, and rumours.

The unreliability of the narrative reflects the unreliability of human reason and the limits of his knowledge. Thus, by subverting omniscient narrative techniques often employed in works of classic realism, *Lord Jim* is making a comment on the mediated nature of reality, truth and human knowledge. By complicating the narrative structure in this manner, Conrad also seems to be questioning the pretensions to omniscience and 'reality' of a writer; it provides a glimpse into the practicalities of the storymaker's process of composition.



LET US KNOW

Sometimes a work of fiction employs an 'omniscient narrator' in its narration. This narrator is never physically present in the plot but only exists as a narrating voice. The omniscient narrator has full access to the events, dialogues, characters' lives including their past and even the mental world of the characters, jumps from scene to scene, following characters throughout a story and assessing the progress of the narrative. An example would be the narrative voice in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

13.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Lord Jim has had a long history of critical reception. Different critics have different things to say about *Lord Jim*, which is generally influenced by their point of view or sometimes by the school of criticism that they belong to. Critics applying the method called 'Deconstruction' generally contend

that it is impossible for the reader to form an absolute impression of Jim's psychological state from the multiple points of view through which his story is narrated, in short, Jim must forever remain an enigma. However, critics who have studied the novel from the point of the 'Reader-response school', which focuses on the reader and their experience of the text, argue that there is an absolute reality which exists and can be perceived through the reader's experience of the novel. Critics belonging to the school of 'Postcolonialism' read the story as a 'heroic adventure' at the height of the British Empire. These critics often read within Conrad's novels an expression of the growing suspicion that 'a primitive and demoralising other' is present within the governing order, rather than the other way round.

Raymond Williams argues in his paper "Joseph Conrad" (1970) against the general tendency to study the novel in symbolic, abstract, metaphysical terms and lays emphasis on its social and historical contexts. Reading from a Feminist perspective, Padmini Mongia in "Ghosts of the Gothic: Spectral Women and Colonised Spaces in *Lord Jim*" (1993) sees the ambivalences in Lord Jim as indicative of the gender anxieties at the ***turn of the century***, the period around which Conrad wrote. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan's *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (1991) argues that the book offers an account of "an active if desperate" attempt to defeat "the spiritual and ethical malaise of modernity" by "a regression to a mythical mode of discourse". Robert Hampton's *Cross Cultural Encounters in Conrad's Malay Fictions* examines the role of gossip and other oral forms in the development of the novel's narrative. Allan Simmons and John Stape gather a number of contemporary perspectives on the novel in their collection *Lord Jim: Centennial Essays* (2010).



LET US KNOW

The phrase 'turn of the century' or *fin de siécle*, in its broadest sense, refers to the transition from one century to another. The term generally refers to a distinctive time period either before or after the beginning of a century or both before and after.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What does the unreliability of the narrative in *Lord Jim* suggest?

Q 6: What, according to critics of Postcolonialism, does the novel reflect?



13.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, the learner is familiarised with certain important aspects of the novel. The themes that are reflected through the novel include theme of common man, isolation, etc. The discussion of the major themes shall lend you multiple insights into the novel. You are now acquainted with the term 'Bildungsroman' and can discuss how the novel displays characteristics of the 'Bildungsroman' which is basically referred to as a novel of formation, education or culture. Apart from these, the unit also highlighted the narrative style of Conrad. Brief discussions of the important characters in the novel were also included for a better understanding of the novel. A general overview of the history of the critical reception of the novel is intended to improve your skills of critical engagement.



13.6 FURTHER READING

1) Allan Simmons & John Henry Stape. (eds). (2000). *Lord Jim: Centennial Essays.*

2) Andrew Michael Roberts. (2014). *Lord Jim*.

3) Gail Fraser. (1988). *Interweaving Patterns in the Works of Joseph Conrad.*

4) Harold Bloom. (2010). *Joseph Conrad*.

5) Ian Watt. (1981). *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century.*

6) Ian Watt. (2000). *Essays on Conrad.*

7) J. H. Stape. (ed). (1996). *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad.*

8) John Batchelor. (1988). *Lord Jim.*

9) John G. Peters. (ed). (2010). *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad.*

10) Keith Carabine. (ed). (1992). *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments.*

11) Miller, J. Hillis. "Lord Jim: Repetition as Subversion of Organic Form". *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*.

12) R. W. Stallman. (ed). (1960). *The Art of Joseph Conrad.*

13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Marlow refers to Jim as 'one of us'. Conrad's vision was dominated by the characteristic despair of the Victorian period resulting out of scientific processes versus the universe being the creation of God's grand design. Jim is a representative of man in his ordinary existence, his struggle to survive. He is not a hero, but an ordinary human, unable to always live up to ideals. Thus, in the face of this meaninglessness of life and the universe, man's consciousness becomes his biggest curse.

Ans to Q No 2: The German term 'bildungsroman' implies a novel of formation, education or culture. Basically, a bildungsroman is a novel of formation, novel of education, or coming-of-age story. It is a literary genre which deals with the process of the protagonist's gradual attainment of psychological and moral maturity. Novels like Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* fall into this category.

Ans to Q No 3: Charles Marlow is the chief narrator in the novel and works as a captain on a ship.

Ans to Q No 4: Jewel is the woman Jim meets in Patusan and falls in love with. After her mother's death, Jewel is oppressed by her step father Cornelius. Jim sympathises with her and protects her. She becomes his link to the insights needed to manage among Patusan affairs. Even before parting with Jim for the last time, Jewel had apprehensions of being left by him and confronts Marlow with her

fears. By the end of the novel, Jewel has turned into a muted person and leads a soundless, inert life in Stein's house.

Ans to Q No 5: The unreliability of the narrative reflects the unreliability of human reason and the limits of his knowledge. By subverting omniscient narrative techniques often employed in works of classic realism, *Lord Jim* is making a comment on the mediated nature of reality, truth and human knowledge.

Ans to Q No 6: Critics belonging to the school of 'Postcolonialism' read the story as a 'heroic adventure' at the height of the British Empire. These critics often read within Conrad's novels an expression of the growing suspicion that 'a primitive and demoralising other' is present within the governing order, rather than the other way round.



13.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Give a character sketch of Jim. Do you see characteristics of the common man in Jim? Explain.

Q 2: Is Jim a completely lonely person? Make a list of the characters which provide him with help and companionship.

Q 3: Analyse the relationship between Jim and Marlow.

Q 4: Who is the narrator of the novel *Lord Jim*? Comment on the narrative technique used by Conrad in the novel *Lord Jim*.

Q 5: Discuss the important themes in the novel *Lord Jim*.

Q 6: Attempt a critical reception of the novel *Lord Jim*.

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