Outcast as Protagonist: The Identity Problem in Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*

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The present paper is intended to deal with the identity problem in the novel *Almayer's Folly* by the Polish-born English novelist Joseph Conrad who has been acclaimed as "Giant in Exile" (Gurko) and "Poland's English Genius"(Bradbrook), hoping thereby to demonstrate the novel's importance as an exploration of identity and to show that in this early work Conrad had already exhibited his psychohistory and concern for identity as a displaced person.

The word identity was first created by psychologist Erikson who postulates that man's life consists of eight stages in which identity formation is the most important process. He classifies man's identity statuses into four categories: foreclosure, diffusion, moratorium, and achievement. One must try to come to terms with the crises in different life stages to get to the status of identity achievement. And a person achieving identity of his own will become more integrated with a sense of anchorage and wholeness and psychosocial equilibrium, and feel himself to be the master of his fate.[1]

Conrad was a man with identity complex and his own life had been a long struggle to achieve an appropriate identity for himself. In his another novel, *Lord Jim*, he has displayed his vision on identity issue through Stein and the French lieutenant, the two respectable characters with whom he had identified himself. Through the stolid and unimaginative French lieutenant who supervises the rescuing of the pilgrim-ship the Patna, Conrad emphasizes his motto of "one does what one can" and his matter-of-fact and practical attitude towards life. Additionally, in Chapter twenty, Conrad lets the wise trader Stein utter a speech which is often quoted and discussed by critics:

> A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns--nicht wahr? ... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hand and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. So if you ask me--how to be? ....
>
> In the destructive element immerse...To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream--and so--wig--usque ad finem....(*Lord Jim* pp.130-1).

This passage can be regarded as Conrad's conviction on how to achieve personal identity which he had developed in himself after undergoing many ups and downs in his odyssey of quests.

To Conrad, identity fundamentally is a problem of "how to be", that is, a problem of how to exist with a sense of self and integration. "Dream" here means goal or ideal, "sea" refers to the living environment; "the destructive element" suggests the baffling situation man might be in and it is also a driving force to prod man to struggle; ewig is Latin which means forever or immortal; usque ad finem signifies until the end in German.[2] Conrad here is telling the reader: Instinctively, every man wishes to pursue his own dream which represents the identity of life, but his dream must be well matched with his capability, as the French Lieutenant puts it, "One does what one can." Usually man's living environment is as tough as the sea to which he must try to adapt himself. So in order to materialize his dream, a man must be realistic enough to immerse himself in a practical goal until the end at all cost. When confronting crisis or dilemma, he should not fight it blindly in a panic like the inexperienced people who are prone to be overwhelmed. Rather, he should try to go ahead composedly by adapting his own actions to overcome the difficulties. Then in this way, his dream or even the adversity--the destructive element--will hold him up like a driving force and buoyancy of sea water helping him survive, develop and prevail at last.

Synthetically speaking, identity can be defined as one's pertinent position which is like an anchor in life, giving one a sense of identification, belongingness and significance. Its absence will lead one to a status of diffusion, feeling that life is void and meaningless. It does not mean that a person achieving identity must have a great career. What counts is that his identity should foster a feeling of psychosocial equilibrium and a sense of coherent self. Otherwise, it will not be a really appropriate identity for him. If we regard life as a process of journey and quest, then identity formation should be central to that process, which one must undergo to further develop oneself. In fact, a man's status quo can be measured in terms of his identity formation, that is, how far he has gone in his identity integration.

Almayer's Folly was Conrad's first novel published in 1895. On the surface it is a fiction about people and events in the far-off oriental islands. Critics have dealt with it from the perspectives of colonialism, imperialism, etc. However, a close reading reveals that what actually obsesses the protagonists is the identity problem and beneath the surface does lie an overriding theme--the struggle of human for identity. In *A Personal Record*, Conrad had claimed that "if I had not got to know Almayer pretty well it is almost certain there would never have been a line of mine in print"(25) and upon finishing Almayer's Folly, he remarked that he felt he "had buried a part of myself in the pages"(66). As a displaced man himself, he did experience the plight of his characters and did have psychological

identification with them. It might be said that he had created his characters with empathy and vicariousness. In the story, Conrad uses a parent-child relationship involving the two protagonists to highlight the identity issue and thereby reflect his own existential situation. The protagonists are Almayer and his daughter Nina. Both of them are obsessed with the identity problem. However, their fates are quite different at the end. Almayer epitomizes the one who runs from the stage of moratorium to identity diffusion, whereas Nina represents the soul who breaks through the bondage of foreclosure toward the phase of moratorium and finally gets to the status of identity achievement.

Almayer is the son of a Dutch expatriate in Java who leaves home for Borneo in his youthful years to try his luck. To him, leaving home is "the beginning of a new existence"(5),[3] a period of moratorium in which he tries to establish his identity as he imagines. With a notion of white superiority and a money-oriented attitude toward life, he thinks that wealth and white superiority decide identity and value of a man. So he frenetically quests for wealth in Borneo. In order to obtain his material gain, he becomes the portage of Tom Lingard, the King of the Sea, and even demeans himself to wed an unloved, secretly despised Malay girl who is Lingard's adopted daughter. On the other hand, for the sake of maintaining his white superiority, he sends his half-caste daughter Nina to Singapore to receive education in a white community, hoping that she will be transformed into a noble and European-like lady. Then some day with his riches, he will return proudly with Nina to Holland and lead a lofty life in "a big mansion in Amsterdam"(10). This is the dream upon which Almayer intends to establish his identity. At first he seems to have calculated everything well. Lingard favors him and promises to let him share his fortune. And as the only white man in the trading post at Sambir, he thinks he has become somebody important and considers the people around him his inferiors. Nevertheless, Almayer's "making it" is only a superficial illusion. In fact, he is falling step by step into the status of identity diffusion without knowing it. Once the superficial illusion is broken, the chilling truth comes to light. The following passage describes how shocked Almayer is when he supposes that Dain Maroola, the man who promises to help him find the gold mine, is dead and that his dream of riches is shattered :

> It seemed to him that for many years he had been falling into a deep precipice. Day after day, month after month, year after year, he had been falling, falling, falling; it was a smooth, round, black thing, and the black walls had been rushing upwards with wearisome rapidity. A great rush, the noise of which he vanced he could hear yet; and now, with an awful shock, he had reached the bottom, and behold! he was alive and whole... (p.99)

It is after being chained to Sambir for twenty-five years that Almayer is terribly awakened to the fact that actually he is a marginal man and an identityless man who, unable

to gain admission to both the local society and the lofty world he imagines, has led a self-deceived life in isolation ever since. His Malay wife despises him and betrays him. Lingard goes bankrupt and disappears. The natives are hostile to him. Even his beloved daughter Nina deserts him by running off with her lover Dain Maroola. Thus, Almayer is abandoned by everyone, wife, patron, rival, daughter, ally. He is aware that his life and endeavours make no sense. In a status of diffusion and losing all reasons for existence, he breaks down altogether, addicts to opium and pines away finally. Thence, from an ambitious young man to an apthetic lost soul, the process of Almayer's life is running from the status of moratorium to identity disintegration.

Almayer's problem lies mainly in his character flaws. Aristotle has claimed that "Character gives us qualities."[4] That is, man's fate tends to be determined by his character. Essentially Almayer is a dreamer and egoist who lacks practicality, adaptability and self-knowledge. His wife considers him a weakling whose life is based on pure illusion and in his daughter's eyes, he is a feeble and traditionless father. As the title of the novel suggests, his character weaknesses cause him to make foolish misjudgements in life: he is eager to achieve material gain by a marriage of convenience to inherit Lingard's fortune; he believes that he is a man of white superiority and his half-caste daughter can be bred to be a European-like lady; he spends blindly all his money to build a useless house to receive the British; and he imagines that Dain Maroola will help him find the gold mine and then he will return to Holland proudly with Nina. But contrary to his expectations, nothing comes of it. His loveless marriage turns out to be "the bitterest of all and the greatest regret"(40). His egocentric love for Nina is rejected. His racial pride only removes him from reality and incapacitates him from communicating with the natives. His investment on the house "Almayer's Folly" proves to be another folly. Thus what he has done never fosters any sense of identification for him. Virtually, he has always been a spiritually alienated castaway and a mortal on the fringe, drifting endlessly in goal disorientation and cultural dislocation. In Conrad's word, "A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea." Almayer falls into dream of his own, but he acts contrary to the principle, "one does what one can" because his ambition so hopelessly outstrips his ability. To make it worse, his unrealistic, egotistic and inadaptable qualities incapacitate him to come to terms with the major crises to further develop himself in reality. Instead of submitting himself to the destructive element and making "the deep, deep sea keep him up with the exertions of his hand and feet in the water," he tries to climb out into the air blindly in a panic as inexperienced people endeavour to do, so he is overtaken and drowned.

By contrast, Almayer's only daughter Nina is typical of the soul who is able to break with the existing dilemma to create a new way of looking at the world and the future. Puzzled by the question of "who am I", she is also struggling to search for her real identity. But unlike her father, she has the ability to integrate what she observes and experiences to deal with the crises in life. She understands her situation and tries to rid herself of any impractical delusion by doing what she can practically to shape her own world, hence she prevails.

As a half-caste, Nina was sent away to Singapore for a white upbringing when she was a little girl. Almayer wants to impose upon her his own values and transform her into a European-like lady, expecting "to see white men bowing low before the power of her beauty and wealth" (101). Thus from her childhood, Nina has had "Christian teaching, social education, and a good glimpse of civilized life"(42). That is her period of foreclosure in which she is a weak and passive dependent, bound in a status of repression and everything is decided and arranged by her father.

In Singapore, however, Nina had bitter experience of white people's racial discrimination and hypocrisies. Her life over there was not happy at all because "her teachers did not understand her nature, and the education ended in a scene of humiliation, in an outburst of contempt from white people for her mixed blood"(42). Gradually, it begins to dawn upon her that it is more important to realize herself as a human being than to be a make-believe European. With this awareness, she returns to Sambir to expect a peaceful refuge to her heart. Nonetheless, she is disappointed because her parents' loveless marriage turns out to be an extreme unhappiness which fills the home with conflict, mutual contempt and hatred. For years Nina has stood between her European father and her Malay mother "with mute heart wondering and angry at the fact of her own existence"(151). Though Almayer loves her, he does not understand her at all. His love actually is egocentric and possessive because he regards her as an extension of himself and an instrument to satisfy his vanity. Nina becomes aware that she has to depend upon herself to achieve her real identity, that is, she must have her own wishes and values independent of her father's to find a meaningful life and an appropriate mode of existence for herself. Otherwise, she is likely to run into the same pitfalls that have trapped her parents. Accordingly, her consciousness of ego identity grows stronger and stronger day after day, which drives her to embark on a stage of moratorium to integrate herself and her future.

Nina's personal observations and experiences motivate her to identify herself with the Malay part of her heredity and abandon the white inheritance of her European father because she discovers that she is not of the white race and between the whites and her, "there is also a barrier that nothing can remove"(179). The deracinated and degenerate state

of her father who in her eyes is "a traditionless father walking about amongst pitfalls, with his head in the clouds, weak, irresolute, and unhappy"(42) resembles a mirror, signifying that life based on delusion, superiority complex, irresolution and impracticality can only lead one to disillusion rather than any achievement. For leading a meaningful life of her own, she must be realistic enough to do what she can. Sambir has turned out to be a colonial world ridden with greediness, conflict and stagnation where people are inclined to be devalued and depersonalized, so remaining in it is just like waiting to be turned into another lost soul. On that account, later, when meeting Dain Maroola and finding a truly affectioinate relationship with him, a fresh sense of destiny is stirring in her. She knows that the true love will be a peaceful refuge for her heart, giving her hope, confidence and sustaining force like an anchor, so she resolutely chooses to run off with Dain to a faraway non-colonial world to seek a new life.

Even Almayer himself at last changes his attitude and helps Nina and Maroola flee by leading them to the mouth of the river. Some readers may feel puzzled and ask: Why does Almayer want to do that since Nina's departure is such a heavy blow to him? Some critics contend that it is Almayer's racial pride that drives him to offer help to Nina and Dain because he cannot tolerate the derision of white men finding his daughter with a Malay.[5] But if so, how should we explain Almayer's own marriage with a Malay girl? In reality, he has tolerated the shame of that kind for twenty- five years in Sambir. Then why should he care about it so much this time? So the contention that attributes Almayer's action to his racial pride is not reasonable. Comparatively, the concept of identity enables us to interpret it more convincingly. We may infer that Almayer must have been moved by Nina's resolution and courage to achieve her real identity and meanwhile, he must have awaked to his own miserable situation as a mortal on the fringe who has been chained to Sambir for twenty-five years in a deracinated and identityless state. How can he let Nina fall another victim to the circumstances like him since Nina is still the only one he really loves in the world? He has loved her ever since in an egocentric way, as Nina clearly tells him. Now he knows he is wrong and he must compensate for it. Therefore, it is the awakening of Almayer's consciousness in identity that motivates him to help Nina and Maroola to leave Sambir to seek a fulfilling life rather than his racial pride.

Nina's confronting her father and rejecting him regardless of his sufferings and the norm of filial piety seems too hard-hearted. But in practice it is nothing surprise if we perceive the shifts in Nina's inner world: how she has changed and developed herself through a long struggle from foreclosure to moratorium to identity achievement. She

knows clearly that she must persist in takinga path of her own instead of subjecting to the one her father has imposed upon her because in comparison, identity achievement is more important than filial loyalty, as she has once told herself that after all it is her own life; it is going to be her life and she has to live on herself. Robert Langbaum's words are noteworthy when he points out that the word identity has become a badge of contemporary relevance, that our society has been called an identity society, and that "the young, to the consternation of their parents, give a higher priority to realizing themselves as human beings than to making a success at careers"(3). Nina's case perhaps can be regarded in this light. From the foregoing, as far as the two protagonists in the story are concerned, we can see that what has preoccupied them basically is the identity issue. Perhaps some may wonder why Conrad is so concerned about the identity problem. Why is he so obsessed by it? The answer lies literally in his personal background and life experiences.

In the light of historical-biographical perspective, the parent-child relationship between Almayer and Nina is reminiscent of that of Conrad and his father Apollo or Poland because young Conrad had also gone through similar struggles like Nina's during his formative years. Almayer is the fictional coun- terpart of Apollo, whereas Nina is that of Conrad. Of course it is difficult to establish a one-to-one relationship between the author's life and his fictional characters or events. We can only say that Conrad appears in the fiction under the guise of different roles to reveal his own problem and his perception about man and existence. His characters partially project himself, partaking of some aspects of his personality. Mostly, what Conrad writes is self-interpretative, as Harold Bloom puts it, "Endlessly enigmatic as a personality and as a formidable moral character, Conrad pervades his own books, a presence not to be put by, an elusive storyteller who yet seems to write a continuous spiritual autobiography"(5).

Conrad was the only son of Apollo Korzeniowski, a famous Polish writer and ardent patriotic revolutionist against the Russian rule in Poland.[6] Both Apollo and his wife sacrificed their lives for their cause in exile. Conrad had long been imbused with the revolutional ideal and Polish heritage. His preoccupation with identity was a lifelong obsession rooted in his experiences since childhood. When he was born, his father bestowed the Christian names Jozef Teodor Kowad Korzeniowski upon him which, according to Czeslaw Milosz, "symbolizes the anti-Russian fighter and resister"(Milosz 37). In addition, Apollo particularly composed a poem to express his patriotic allegiance to Poland and his great expectation for his only son:

> Be a Pole... and tell yourself
> That you are without a country, without love,
> Without a homeland, without humanity,

As long as Mother Poland is in the grave...
Without her there is no salvatio!
With that thought grow in courage!
Give her and yourself immortality! (Meyer, 65-6)[7]

The import of this poem is quite obvious. Apollo had implanted the seeds of Polish patriotim and revolutional ideal in Conrad's heart since his infancy. He wanted his son to follow his path to be a brave patriotic fighter to continue fighting against the Russian, and furthermore, to pursue glory and immortality for Mother Poland and himself. After his parents died, Conrad was living under the supervision of his relatives. In 1874, as a seventeen-year-old man, Conrad was also faced with the identity crisis--the state of being uncertain about himself and his future. He resolved to build a new life by leaving Poland for France to be a self-exile. His relatives tried hard to dissuade him from his intention, but finally allowed him to go his own way. That symbolized the beginning of Conrad's phase of moratorium in which he was engaged in a lot of searches and strayings to develop himself.

As evidenced by what he had done in the course of his life, Conrad was essentially a man with Polonism--Polish nationalism, or "an attachment to Poland, its traditions, interests and ideals"(Szczypien 22). He was well aware of the double meaning of his name and his mission to his motherland. In an interview, he had explicitly expressed his loyalty to Poland, "The English critics--to be sure I am in fact an English writer--in discussing me always add that there is something in me that is incompresensible, unfathomable, impalpable. You for one can seize the impalpable, can understand the unfathomable. It is Polonism" (Szczypien 22). In addition, when he was in Bohemia with his uncle Tadeusz, he had also disclosed his heart-felt connection with Poland:

I always remember what you said when I was leaving Cracow: "Remember" -- you said-- "wherever you may sail you are sailing towards Poland!"
That I have never forgotten, and never will forget! (Najder 206)

Zdzislaw Najder remarks that Conrad must have carried within him all his life "a haunting mental image of Poland"(5). More accurately, it might be said that Conrad must have carried within him a biologically genetic load consisting of his father's wishes, the Polish heritage, and racial memories, which had been transmuted into a holy commitment to his nation. In this sense, Conrad was indeed a man born with a dream because since his birth, he had been destined to struggle for his country, family and himself. Nevertheless, due to his quitting Poland and becoming Anglicized, he had been misunderstood by his compatriots who considered him an ethnic traitor abandoning his patriotic cause and

national identity[8]. Conrad had not defended himself directly and clearly, but via his fiction, the motive of his actions should be illuminated to a great extent.

Metaphorically speaking, the novel Almayer's Folly can be read as an analogy of Conrad's ambivalence toward his father and his nativeland. It has implicitly explicated why Conrad chose to quit Poland in 1874 to go abroad. The message behind the story should be: Conrad knew that as the son of a revolutionist, he would never have a chance to achieve anything great in the Russian-dominated Poland. And at that time Poland was so weak and hopeless just like the rotten colonized Sambir that remaining in it was tantamount to waiting for perishment. Conrad had witnessed how his parents and relatives were destroyed under an insurmountable power. Apollo was a heroic idealist, "violent in emotions, impractical in his deeds, often helpless and unresourceful"(Meyer 21). His tragedy must have awaked Conrad to the lesson that violent revolution based on romantic heroism could not work out in glorifying Poland. Instead, it tended to result in disaster. Conrad did respect and cling to Apollo's noble and patriotic idealism. But Apollo's sacrifice appeared to him as a sheer waste of precious life and talent. Therefore, rather than stay in Poland to follow his father's heroic but impractical path, he would take an unwasteful and realistic way to pursue his ideals through the act of leaving Poland and the act of writing in English[9] regardless of the commonly held view that he was an ethnic traitor who had betrayed his fatherland and noble cause. In actuality, Conrad never tried to deny Apollo's patriotic cause. He just tried to get himself out of the negative and dark sides of his way of life. When considered in this light, Conrad's sensible and brave choice, like Nina's, was far from an act of betrayal, but an act of self-preservation and a step to pursue more positive values of life.

The early Conrad was partaking of the impractical and imaginative qualities of the man of Almayer's type[10]. But in his twenty-year-long wayward career, he had learned from different people he met and thereby constantly reshaped himself to be a mature man. In this sense, his creating Almayer, aside from reflecting his father's case, can be also viewed as a self- introspection which offered him an insight into his own existing status as a displaced man. If Nina story represents Conrad's struggling to locate his orientation in life, then Almayer's signals Conrad's self-examination and effort to rid himself of his character defects: impracticality, delusion and inconstancy.

A further reading of Conrad's works will find that in *Lord Jim*, Conrad has again uncovered his psychological state and vision of identity through creating Jim and the Patna incident. The protagonist Jim deserts the Patna by jumping into a lifeboat, whereas Conrad deserted Poland by taking "a standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations"(Personal Record 121). The name "Patna", according to some critics,

resembles Polska(Poland)"(Morf 163-6) or "Patria(fatherland in Polish)" (Milosz 219). That suggests that Jim's jump off from the Patna represents Conrad's deserting his fatherland because Poland was as hopeless and rusty as the Patna. Only by leaving it could he save himself from degeneration and being destroyed. And Stein's famous "Destructive Element" speech, in terms of identity perspective, can be seen as a design to demonstrate Conrad's highlight on practicality, adaptability, and persistence.

When Conrad determined to devote himself to writing in 1894, he had virtually ended his period of moratorium and reached the status of identity achievement. In him we find an extremely idealistic and yet at the same time extremely realistic attitude toward identity formation. Since then, writing had become his anchor in life to which he could submit himself and from which he derived a sense of identification, stability and coherence. Conrad's wife Jessie has recalled in her *Joseph Conrad As I Know Him*, "His whole attitude of life was opposed to any idea of rest, he gave the impression of continuous restlessness" (70). After undergoing a lot of ups and downs in life, the late Conrad had turned out to be a typical idealist-realist who knew how to immerse in his goal and how to handle appropriately the "destructive element" in baffling situation with his own conviction. His persistent endeavours resulted in forty-two remarkable fictional works which have made immense contribution to the enrichment of English literature and established his immortal position as a great Polish-English writer in the world.

Accordingly, on the grounds of the extrinsic and intrinsic explorations, we find that *Almayer's Folly* is essentially an important novel dealing with the identity problem which humans are having to face. Through depicting the story of the outcast protagonists, the novel has offered a salient case study of man's identity statuses as well as Conrad's psychohistory as a self- exiled Anglophone writer. Conrad once stated that it was his ambition "to make Polish life enter English literature... In the course of development the inner story of most my books will come out--a sort of literary confession as to the sources as well as the aims"(Szczypien 14). We discover that Conrad did have defined his identity by embodying his experiences in his fiction according to his concept of life and by transforming himself partially into different roles to express his inward voices regarding his existential plight. His journey of life consisted mainly in a process of identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. It was such a detour which appeared so unusual and so oblique, yet at the same time so idealistic and so realistic!

Notes

1.See E.H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985).

2.As for the connotative meaning of this passage, I have consulted Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (New York: Longman Inc., 1982), pp.131-2.

3.Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*, ed. Jaques Berthoud(New York: Oxford UP, 1992), p.15. Further page reference is to this edition and is hereafter cited in the text.

4.Cited by E.M. Forster, p.85.

5.Both Watts and Berthoud hold that it is Almayer's racial pride that motivates him to help Nina and Dain flee. See Watts, p.122 and Berthoud, p.xxxy.

6.My life sketch of Conrad is based on: B.C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton UP, 1970) and Norman Sherry, *Conrad* (Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1988).

7.Cited by Meyer, pp.65-6.

8.For example, a Polish woman writer Eliza Orzeszkowa attacked Conrad openly by saying that he had abandoned his national identity and written for money. See Meyer, p.65.

9.There are different views about the reason why Conrad chose to write in English and become Anglicized. Comparatively, Sooyoung Chon's contention that because English is "a leading language with world-wide influence which might gain a wider and more sympathetic hearing for the Polish voice, and because England was a fertile ground for realizing his selfhood in relation to the nation and through it ultimately to the process of world history" appears to be more acceptable. See Sooyoung Chon, "Imperialism as Metaphor in Joseph Conrad's Fiction," Doctoral dissertation, U of Michigan, 1986, pp.41-2.

10.According to the biographical information, around 1877, Conrad had engaged in smuggling arms to Spain and to South America to make quick money, and was involved in a dual for a woman. Later, he took part in the gambling at Monte Carlo and lost all his money. In debt, he even attempted to shoot himself. These demonstrate that young Conrad was still partaking the character defects of Almayer or his father Apollo. See Sherry, *Conrad*.

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