



Research Paper

## Joseph Conrad's Dona Rita in *The Arrow of Gold*: Female Beauty and the Male Gaze

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**[Abstract:** This paper focuses on Joseph Conrad's presentation of a female protagonist as an object of male idealized beauty. In his *The Arrow of Gold* the author attempts to portray a woman who possesses the quintessence of female beauty for which all men who come near her get enchanted. The narrator and all other characters, both male and female, comment so adorably on her life and beauty that she becomes an idol and object of worship to them. This essay examines the male view of the female protagonist with regard to her beauty and fortune, and also aims to assess if these views are objective or stereotypical ideas of men. ]

**Key Words:** Female Beauty, Male View of Women, Dona Rita, Conrad's Idolization of his first Love

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### I. Introduction:

Joseph Conrad is deemed as one of the high priests of modernism and an experimentalist of writing styles of fiction. His tremendous achievement as a Polish- British writer<sup>1</sup> has been a matter of surprise to many readers who like him for his moral visions and are mostly interested in his treatment of the burning issues of his time like imperialism, capitalism, war, revolution, anarchy and modernism that are still relevant to our present time. He is thus popular for *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, "Typhoon", "Youth", *The Secret Agent*, *Nostramo*, *Under Western Eyes* and *The Shadow-Line*. But all these tales are liked for his masculine themes, and hence he is mostly known as a male writer. Ruth L. Nadelhaft writes in this regard that "Conrad was for almost all of his writing life regarded as a writer of literature for men" (1). It is true that he has focused more on men than on women in his works; true that he has delineated a male world of sailors, business men, warriors, anarchists and revolutionists and romantics. And the absence of women characters in some of his works such as "Typhoon", "Youth", *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and "The Secret Sharer" has been marked by many feminist critics. But it is equally true that he has created female characters in most of his works that offer a glimmer of hope for female readers. Though their roles are marginal and subordinate to that of the males, a close critical look on his women characters can significantly recreate them with a much larger female world for both male and female readers. But most critics have ignored the subject of women because they think that Conrad did not have the required first-hand experience of knowing women, and that he had less concerns for them. This is why Ruth L. Nadelhaft argues: "The nature of Conradian criticism for many years created around his life and work an atmosphere peculiarly masculine" (1). Thus many critics questioned Conrad's ability to create real life women characters and so deemed most of his female characters as "shadowy, unread, over-generalized, sentimental stock figures — often resembling those in cheap magazine fiction" (Bross 3-4). Dona Rita is one such character in *The Arrow of Gold* which though resembles a bit a shadowy figure but not totally a fictitious one. This essay focuses on this critically neglected character of Rita - a woman who was both a real life character and a fictional character in the novel which has not been deemed as a good piece of fiction and so has been discarded by most critics. This essay thus looks at the representation of this female character to see how this lady has been treated by the author, the narrator and other characters of the novel. As Conrad has presented her

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Conrad was born in Poland; he came to England at the age of 21. He did not learn English academically; he learnt it by reading books and also from his contact with English sailors; yet he was able to write his first novel in 1895 when he was 38.

as the central character, how far this character stands on her own footing and how far the author has idealized her creating her as one of the most beautiful women in the world as a way of paying homage to his first love in France will be explored in this work. It will also deal with the male gaze of female beauty with regard to this female protagonist.

## II. Literature Review:

Many early male and female critics claim that Conrad's lack of experience of contact with civilized British or European women is the cause of his failure in creating significant female protagonists with the wholeness of female psychology. Thus, as early as 1914, Grace Isabel Colbron says in "Conrad's Women" that "Conrad's women are never complex. They do not change or develop in any sense of the word. They are presented to us complete, in one tone, like the line of the horizon, or the colour of a flower . . . It counts only in its effect on the men into whose lives they come" (476). In *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline*, Thomas Moser also claims that due to Conrad's dislike of women and love, the latter could not create a successful romantic love scene and any truly believable woman character. Ponnuthurari Sarvan also expresses the same view in "Under African Eyes": "Conrad, like Hardy, is uncomfortable in handling sexual relationships and unsuccessful in his attempts to draw female characters" (157). However, Richard Curle, a well-wisher and a contemporary critic of Conrad, who has played a significant role in the publicity of Conrad's work, counters the charge against Conrad as a misogynist or a disinterested one in women characters and writes:

To say, as it is sometimes said, that Conrad does not understand women is an observation revealing blindness. For, indeed, his women portraits are the most finished, delicate, and poignant of all his portraits . . . from the fact that Conrad does not make love the centre theme of all his stories and . . . his finest women are good women. They are of the charming and merciful order of Desdemona rather than of the ardent and fiery order of Cleopatra. (145)

In Curle's view, women characters like Mrs. Gould, and Flora, are like Shakespeare's Desdemona and Portia, angels in the house of the Victorian period, whereas Dona Rita may not be included in the Desdemona type nor into the fiery type. She is neither a Victorian one nor a modern one. She is rather a woman living in a transitional period from the Victorian type to the modern one. Many female critics, after F. R. Leavis' acceptance of him as a classic British fiction-writer in his *The Great Tradition*, counter the negative image of Conrad as a misogynist and they claim and argue that Conrad knew some important women with whom he had some contact, and his female characters are significant. Susan Lundvall Brodie offers the masculine/feminine antithesis in her "Conrad's Feminine Perspective":

That Conrad shows a conventional tendency to idealize women is true, but portraits such as Emilia Gould, Rita, Flora, Mrs. Travers and even Nina Almayer show his awareness of women's painful realities, their suffering and endurance of 'life's perversities'. In each of these characters Conrad dramatizes an intense inner struggle that reflects, certainly, more than one dimension only. (142)

Joyce Wexler writes, "It is time to correct Joseph Conrad's reputation as a writer who falls short when the subject is women or sex" (424). Indeed, women have always been a subject of study to male writers who represent women out of their own likes or dislikes, and Conrad is no exception. However, in art and literature by men, women are mostly liked for their beauty. Male writers as such delineate beautiful women characters as a site of desire and worship. Dona Rita in *The Arrow of Gold* is such one who is one of the most adored women among Conrad's characters. She is a real life character whom, critics have said, Conrad pursued in his boyhood in France, and so her character is a sentimental creation; that is why she seems to be an artificially painted character. This is one of the reasons for which most critics do not consider it as a good piece of work. To John Batchelor, it is "the worst of the late works" (As qtd. in Simmons 208). As Norman Page claims, "A fatal weakness at the heart of the novel is that, though this is primarily a love story, the hero's passion for Rita is presented as a somewhat abstract affair. As for Rita herself . . . she remains no more than a shadow" (124). Despite critics' disapproval of the novel and its characterization, this essay finds some important aspects that help us to understand Conrad's mood of nostalgia that reminiscences his own frustrating days in youth when he failed to win the love of a girl. In defense of his contemporary reviewers' disapproval of the novel, Conrad himself wrote. "This is the penalty of having produced something unexpected" (As qtd. in Simmons 208). In his letter to Mr. Everitt writes, "...the novel may be best described as the Study of a Woman who might have been a very brilliant phenomenon but has remained obscure . . . The Book however is but slightly concerned with her public activity, which was really of a secret nature. What it deals with is her private life: her sense of her own position, her sentiments and her fears" (Jean-Aubry 201). Elsewhere he says that it is a young man's "initiation into a life of passion" (As qtd. in Simmons 208). However, some of Conrad's contemporary reviewers praised the novel, as Sir Sidney Colvin in *Observer* (24 August 1919) considered the novel as "a study of a woman's heart and mystery scarcely to be surpassed in literature" (As qtd. in Page 126). Norman Sherry also liked the novel and claimed that "With the publication of *The Arrow of Gold*, Conrad became the grand old man of letters, taking over the mantle of Thomas Hardy" (As qtd. in Page 126).

### III. Methodology:

This essay follows the qualitative content analysis method and is thus based on close textual exegeses. First, it introduces the topic and then presents the literature review on the topic. Then it focuses on the primary text and develops its own arguments drawing on some critical essays and books on Conrad's women characters and the beauty myth. For documentation, it follows the MLA eighth edition.

### IV. Discussion:

Thus Conrad's *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) sparked conflicting responses. Much of this contradictory remarks and the obscurity lie in Conrad's attempt to portray a woman's heart which is actually based on the traditional male view. Undoubtedly, the novel is about a woman as he himself claims too, but it is more about a young man's love for and idea about a beautiful woman. Nadelhaft argues that "... the narrator ... attempts to redefine Rita's femininity, her identity as a woman" (120). As, Rita, the object of this study, is delineated with regard to her fortune and life situations conditioned by men with whom her relationship and responses constitute the plot. She is the object of the study because she is beautiful and a widow too with a large fortune given by her master artist and so she seems to be a liberated woman surrounded by many suitors but she is actually not so. Her life is nothing but her conversations with different suitors, and indeed, in modern European urban society a woman is worthy as long as she has suitors. Her political and social self is overshadowed by her beauty and social life which she leads not according to her own choice but to that of the society. Rita says to George, "I don't know the truth about myself because I never had an opportunity to compare myself to anything in the world. I have been offered mock adulation, treated with mock reserve or with mock devotion. I have been fawned upon with an appalling earnestness of purpose, I can tell you" (Conrad, *The Arrow of Gold*, 207).<sup>2</sup> In his First Note to *The Arrow of Gold* Conrad mentions that the whole story is meant to be written only for one woman who is the writer's childhood friend who once wrote a letter to the author:

I have been hearing of you lately. I know where life has brought you. You certainly selected your own road. But to us, left behind, it always looked as if you had struck out into a pathless desert. We always regarded you as a person that must be given up for lost. But you have turned up again; and though we may never see each other, my memory welcomes you and I confess to you I should like to know the incidents on the road which has led you to where you are now. (3)

The narrator says that a lady persuades him to get into the affairs of supplying arms to the Don Carlos supporters, the Carlist army, for the throne of Spain as a reaction against Communist republicanism. Dona Rita is a supporter of Don Carlos, as she was the mistress of Carlos; this is why she has got involved in the revolution. However, the story is written by the writer as an adventure of romance. The narrator George says that nobody could persuade the young George (the fictional prototype of Conrad himself) to get involved in such a dangerous mission other than a charming lady like Rita. Rita is, therefore, an inspiring woman who could catch in her net any young man like George. But in reality, though she is portrayed as the most beautiful woman in the Conrad oeuvre, she is like Flora in Chance and Lena in Victory made what she is by the kindness of other men "who attempt to use them for their own reasons" (As qtd in Nadelhaft 119).

Conrad answers the letter of his childhood friend, Rita in the text: "I believe you are the only one now alive who remembers me as a child. . . . I only remember that we were great chums. In fact, I chummed with you even more than with your brothers . . . when you were about fifteen, you always could make me do whatever you liked" (3). Conrad's work is full of his reminiscences of the past. This is of boyhood and probably a memory of his first love which makes him weave the story. The story is a proof of Conrad's genuine concern for women. In the last line of preceding quotation he shows the magical power of a young girl over a young boy. Therefore, among all women in Conrad's life, perhaps Rita, after Marguerite Poradowska, is the most loved one and adorably built.

Dona Rita, the heiress of Allegre's large fortune, is a French lady, and so she has been portrayed with much care. She is made an idol of worship, and thus she is a combination of womanly virtues with masculine attributes. She is capable of taking part in revolution, and so she is entrusted with the duty of supplying arms to the Carlist army; but the narrator, George suspects and says, "You mean to say that you expect a woman to arrange that sort of thing for you" (17). And Mr. Blunt remarks indifferently, "A trifle, for her. At that sort of thing women are best. They have less scruples" (17). The idea is that a woman can easily pass without being a suspect. This is how a woman can be used for any political purposes. Even in *Under Western Eyes* women revolutionaries are used for that purpose. No real benefit or power comes to them through any regime change or revolution. But though she is a woman of influence, it is not that she possesses it by herself. It is left to her by her master, Henry Allegre, a famous painter and a very rich man. Mills, the narrator's friend, says, "I am not an easy enthusiast where women are concerned, but she was without doubt the most admirable find of his amongst

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<sup>2</sup> This is the primary text and so further references to this text will be indicated by page numbers only.

all the priceless items he had accumulated in that house – the most admirable. . .” (23). And Mr. Blunt says, “Ah! But, you see, of all the objects there she was the only one that was alive” (23). It is very common that a woman with some beauty and position must be the point of discussion among men. From scholars to ordinary men, all types of people talk about beautiful women, gossip about them with pretended knowledge, intelligence, and they generalize, they particularize and often tell stories, real, imaginative or imaginary, most often with contemptuous desire, platonic or sexual. Think of the myth of Helen of Greece that has been often recreated throughout the ages. The scholars in Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* arrange a conference among them and conclude that Helen is the most beautiful woman in the world. The dead Helen is brought back to life by Faustus’ magical power. Thus, Rita is identified as an object of Allegre’s drawing room or house; the difference is that she is the living object. In France, more so in other European or Western countries, beautiful women are the real concerns of men who spend most of their time either in their company or thinking about them in a practical manner. Mills reflects on the male views, “... she radiated life, she had a plenty of it, and it had a quality . . . it seems to me that in the Elysian Fields she’ll have her place in a very special company” (23). She is compared to Cleopatra and La Valliere (a mistress of French king Lois XIV from 1661-1667). She is compared with these legendary women in terms of their beauty, and thus Conrad has also tried to depict the most beautiful woman. Truly, as the narrator says, “A woman is always an interesting subject” (24). She is praised because of her simplicity, and Mills says that women with big mouths are like that:

A big mouth is often a sign of a certain generosity of mind and feeling. Young man, beware of women with small mouths. Beware of the others, too, of course; but a small mouth is a fatal sign . . . I have known her for, say, six hours altogether. It was enough to feel the seduction of her native intelligence and of her splendid physique. . . . She possesses another virtue and it is her ability to become very close to everybody who comes near her, and it is “the terrible gift of familiarity. (25)

There is an old sculptor named Doyen who says to Rita, “I am a great sculptor of women. I gave up my life to them, poor unfortunate creatures, the most beautiful, the wealthiest, the most loved . . . Two generations of them” (43). The man’s eyes become full of tears: “You are enough to make one cry” (43). And then the old tells Rita: “I shall finish my artist’s life with your face; but I shall want a bit of those shoulders, too. I can see through the cloth that they are divine. If they aren’t divine, I will eat my hat” (43). Rita also understands the passion in the heart of that old man. Think about the male gaze. Every male is a Doyen, a sculptor of women, especially of beautiful women. The artist finally makes a “terra-cotta bust” of Rita. But this Rita could not know “of the world of men and women” till Allegre’s death. After the death of Allegre, she becomes as powerful as “She can get anything she likes in Paris. She could get a whole army over the frontier if she liked . . . Doors fly open before the heiress of Mr. Allegre” (55). This is the power of a woman’s beauty, and the weakness for beautiful women in men thrusts upon this power in women. Conrad has always created her major women characters as beautiful women or girls. In his first novel *Almayer’s Folly*, the half-caste girl Nina is presented as “a woman, black-haired, olive-skinned, tall, and beautiful, with great sad eyes, where the startled expression common to Malay womankind was modified by a thoughtful tinge inherited from her European ancestry” (36). The Dutch Lieutenant remarks seeing Nina, “She was very beautiful and imposing” (129). Aissa in *An Outcast of the Islands* is a beautiful girl whose beauty ensnares the white European Willems and ultimately destroys her. So is Jewel in *Lord Jim*. Even Kurtz’s Arican native mistress in *Heart of Darkness* is delineated as an elegant and a physically attractive woman: “She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress (Conrad 100).”<sup>3</sup> In order to be even a mistress a woman must be physically attractive. As a critic says, “The beauty myth which is a patriarchal product has been haunting women for generations. Wearing ornaments, using cosmetics, keeping the body slim - all these are the capitalist world’s values to entertain men, keep women subordinate and profit thereby” (Ahmed 107). Susan Brownmiller in protest to the Miss American contest writes, “Women in our society are forced daily to compete for male approval, enslaved by ludicrous beauty standards that we ourselves are conditioned to take seriously and to accept” (9). She objects to the male standard of beauty and questions the standard of beauty that establishes women’s worth and rewards women only on the basis of their looks. Naomi Wolf writes, “...today’s successful woman is still tyrannized by western standards of female beauty – particularly in the age of cosmetic surgery where perfection is seen achievable” (As qtd. in Whelehan217).

Thus women are not only compelled to put on ornaments but also encouraged to do cosmetic surgery to appear as more beautiful, but these things eventually do not make them more beautiful than before, but because it is a social demand which is wrongly deemed universal, it presses women to beautify themselves. Naomi Wolf in her *The Beauty Myth* writes, “The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men ... Strong men battle for beautiful women...” (12).

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Ed. Paul O’prey, (London :Penguin, 1998). Further textual citations are from this edition and indicated by page numbers only.

She claims that the beauty myth is also political in nature. Whatever, beauty has been one of the major concerns for women and that is why in art, literature and media beautiful women are prized highly; the idea persists in every society, be it a black or white society. The male gaze thus considers women's worth in terms of not only their domestic labour and body but also their beauty, and hence they are often treated like beautiful objects, and showpieces. Allan Simmons considers "Rita's construction as an object of male fascination, constructed by the so-called 'male gaze'" (209). Every beautiful object has to have its owner. Conrad displays this universal desire of man that wants to own everything like that of Kurtz, "My ivory, my intended, ...". Here in *The Arrow of Gold* Allegre first sees her when she is "sitting on a broken fragment of stone-work buried in the grass of his wild garden, full of thrushes, starlings, and other innocent creatures of the air" (34). Allegre sees her and makes a painting of her and she becomes her possession as the author says that Rita becomes Allegre's "most admirable find ... amongst all the priceless items he had accumulated". Simmons thus claims, "... the presentation of Rita is indistinguishable from the claims of male proprietorship" (209). Allegre, the painter, is an ideal painter. And he has kept two paintings of Rita's image in his drawing room, and visitors claim that those are his treasures.

Even Blunt's mother marvels at those paintings but asks the reason why he paints the two faces from the same model. And the model is Dona Rita. Blunt's mother comments, "Women can be miraculously dense sometimes" (28). Allegre answers. "Perhaps it is because I saw in that woman something of the women of all time" (28). Thus, the romanticizing tendency with a kind of Platonic attraction for a woman like Rita demonstrates the male stereotypical ideas about women. Nadelhaft rightly points out that "For a young man raised on sexual stereotypes and romance ... Rita can only be an exotic creature or a magnificent statue, not a particular, idiosyncratic woman as subject" (125). In an attempt to mythicize and idolize male attraction for beauty, Conrad makes Rita an object to be described and defined according to the male desire and that is why he makes another woman, Leonore, as quoted earlier, comment on her character, "She is for no man! She would be vanishing out of their hands like water that cannot be held" (135). Thus, Rita is an idealized portrait of the most beautiful woman in the world who cannot be deviled by any man. She has got such an angelic beauty for which no man can feel any sensual attraction other than Platonic love. Conrad thus pays tribute to her first unfulfilled love.

Rita, however, represents the women who have been the objects of flattery and male desire. An isolated woman, she realizes after the death of her master, "My life might have been described as looking at mankind from a fourth-floor window for years" (81). She is much lonely and devoid of the company of other women. She never saw her mother even nor even knew how she looked. She says after the death of her master, "Listen, I don't need to justify myself, but if I had known a single woman in the world, if I had only had the opportunity to observe a single one of them, I would have been perhaps on my guard. But you know I hadn't. The only woman I had anything to do with was myself, and they say that one can't know oneself" (83-84). She also realizes that because of her beauty and being the heiress of a famous rich painter, she has been treated by all famous male persons of the society as "a precious object in a collection, an ivory carving or a piece of Chinese porcelain" (84). Now she wonders if she had any talent by which she could have done anything:

But Henry Allegre would never let me try. He told me that whatever I could achieve would never be good enough for what I was. The perfection of flattery! Was it that he thought I had not talent of any sort? . . . he was jealous. He wasn't jealous of mankind any more than he was afraid of thieves for his collection; but he may have been jealous of what he could see in me, of some passion that could be aroused. (84-85).

Later, she reflects that men "would trade on a woman's troubles – and in the end make nothing of that either" (100). She is a girl who has come to her present position of popularity through different phases of male dominations. She consciously has not tried to ensnare anybody, yet Mills, who never openly declares his love for Rita, calls her "old Enchantress" (105). Rita is a conscious woman who has understood the necessity of a female bond and so she relies only on her maid, Rose, whom Allegre brought for her some eight years ago. Rita says, "She has looked after me from the first . . . she's the only human being on whom I can lean. She knows . . . What! doesn't she know about me! She has never failed to do the right thing for me unasked. I couldn't part with her" (116). The preference for a female companionship to a male one is of modern feminist perspective. She has been given some of the female perspectives by Conrad: "Women seem some mysterious creatures" (200). Rita says, "I have suffered domination and it didn't crush me because I have been strong enough to live with it" (206).

Conrad's understanding of female bonds is also evident in *The Arrow of the Gold* where a woman, Madame Leonore, who once captivated Dominic's heart says to Dominic, "You see, we women are not like you men, indifferent to each other unless by some exception. Men say we are always against one another but that's only men's conceit" (133). In fact, she is the woman who understands other women. It is, indeed women who understand both men and women better than men. Even without mixing with Rita or talking with her, Leonore understands Rita, and says, "Keep that well in your mind: she is for no man! She would be vanishing out of their hands like water that cannot be held" (135). And why Rita eludes the grasp of other men after Henre Allegre,

even George whom she loves in the end, is well understood by Madame Leonore, "Maybe too proud, too wilful, too full of pity. Signorio, you don't know much about women" (135). The narrator George becomes the mouth-piece of Conrad himself when he says:

Woman and the sea revealed themselves to me together, as it were: two mistresses of life's values. The illimitable greatness of the one, the unfathomable seduction of the other working their immemorial spells from generation to generation fell upon my heart at last; a common fortune, an unforgettable memory of the sea's formless might and of the sovereign charm in that woman's form wherein there seemed to beat the pulse of divinity rather than blood. (88)

The above passage shows the male perception of women. A woman is compared with the sea. As sea is mysterious, so is a woman. The sea is seductive in the sense that people go to the sea for romance and adventure and often face danger like storms and shipwreck. A woman is also seductive and threatening like the sea as long as she is considered beautiful by the world. Rita is also aware of female power:

Men are rather conceited about their powers. They think they dominate us. Even exceptional men will think that; men too great for mere vanity, men like Henry Allegre for instance, who by his consistent and serene detachment was certainly fit to dominate all sorts of people. Yet for the most part they can only do it because women choose more or less consciously to let them do so. (215)

### V. Conclusion:

Thus Rita, Conrad's most loved heroine, is presented as the most complex woman in his oeuvre whose life and motives of action are not understandable to anybody, and hence she appears as a modern woman who knows how to live her own free life. People around Rita thought that Allegre caught Rita in his net because shewas a poor girl and she could not turn down the advancement of such a great rich painter. What could she do to survive well? But Rita tells the truth; she confesses that it is she who actually caught Allegre in her net. She is more like George Bernard Shaw's Ann in *Man and Superman* who pursues Tanner for her own sake. From that perspective she is the embodiment of new woman – a woman whom Conrad tried to present like Helen or Cleopatra as the most beautiful woman in the world but at the same time as a liberated woman, and this way he relived his own romantic years in France where he fell in love with this girl. The girl reached to womanhood but still remained in Conrad's memory intact as the most beautiful and most adorable woman in the world and thus the creation of fictional Rita was a kind of tribute to his unrequited love. Therefore, based on Conrad's own life, the character of Dona Rita, though partly a victim of male desire and male gaze, emerges as one of the most beautiful and powerful women characters in literature and demands more critical attention.

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