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**Ethics and politics in Joseph Conrad's
The Secret Agent and Bozorg Alavi's *Her
Eyes***

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Abstract

In this paper, the writers try to compare two authors, the Iranian leftist, Bozorg Alavi (1904-1997) and the Polish Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), in their novels *Her Eyes* (1952) and *The Secret Agent* (1907), respectively. Although these two writers have different attitudes to Socialism and the question of revolution, both share Romantic idealism and a tragic sense of personal and social life. Moreover, they both are precursors of modernist novel in their countries, and share a humanistic attitude to life. However, both are intellectual elites and their relation to their homeland is problematic. All this make possible a comparative study of these two writers. Their political proclivities tint their views of life and politics and thus they have a dissimilar interpretation of nationalism and socialism, two political subjects they are entangled with. The very same political attitude colors their ideas of human agency and the ethics of human responsibility. Nevertheless, each writer critiques and questions the premises of his political belief in his work, which is the most characteristic modernist attitude they share. The paper will bring similarities, differences and contradictions in Conrad and Alavi's opinions to politics and individual ethics into focus and conclude that the reason for greatness and fame of these two writers is their attempts at reaching an understanding of humanity rather than reporting on the political taste of a people or time.

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Introduction

Persian literature has borrowed extensively from Russian literature, but Iranian writers have more or less overlooked English literature. Looking back at the problematic international relations between Iran and England, it can be argued, from among other reasons, that the disregard for English literature is more or less a means of putting up resistance to and expressing disapproval of historical English imperialism in Iran. Nevertheless, the interest Russian literature has evoked from Iranian writers is not attributable to political alliance or friendship between the two countries. One contested reason for these literary influences is that the rhetoric used by Soviet communists has been more in agreement with the religioethical rhetoric prevalent in Iran, than that of the English liberalists¹. It was to change this rhetoric and its concomitant epistemology that Mirza Malkolm Khan² (1833-1908) proposed to change Persian alphabet. Hence, Iranian writers have used Soviet socialism as a weapon of war against English liberalism.

Bozorg Alavi who lived the major part of his life far away from Iran, and Joseph Conrad who forsake his country and travelled the world, finally settling in England, both had a strained relation with their homelands and thus their view of their lands' socio-political questions was more nuanced and diverging. This article intends to illustrate how at the end of the nineteenth century, while Europe was culturally colonizing the world, a literature emerged which questioned and undermined the cultural imperialism of the West. Conrad's skeptic view on English nationalism and its international relations was among the reasons he was ignored by the English, which in turn made him more stringent towards his audience. On the other hand, Alavi who had just returned to Iran from Germany plunged himself into the surging sea of Iranian communism, later to bitterly admit this movement's shortcomings and his distrust of its uncompromising attitudes. In this way, these two writers interspersed the dominant political proclivity of their homelands with their own extranational experiences. And while they both made critiques against radical political strategies, being located at the polar edges of an imperialist relation - with the force of geography determining their language, culture and hence their worldview and epistemology—Conrad and Alavi each endowed their novels with a different tint of critique.

In 1958, Frank Raymond Leavis (1895-1978) spoke of Conrad and his choice of English—and not French—to write in, as the cause of misunderstanding on the part of the English audience, who deemed itself “intelligent and serious enough” for a good writer to produce his best. Ironically, Edward Garnett, a friend of Conrad and a critic, reviewed *The Secret Agent* in *Nation* (No. 81) commenting on Conrad and calling him “alien of genius, casting about for a medium in which to express his sympathy and his knowledge, hit upon our own tongue” (Sherry 21). After a couple of decades, Leavis came to the conclusion that neither Conrad was such a genius to have great goals like that in mind, nor the English public was superior to the French (183). Conrad wrote because he was first a writer, and second because he had a family to support, and the English audience was all but understanding or intelligent³. The sour relation Conrad had with the English comes evident in this commentary by Leavis, if it was not by a cursory look at the reception of his novels during his lifetime. Bozorg Alavi, like Conrad, spend most of his life away from his homeland, and although he did not suffer a lack of audience, yet his works have been banned before and after the Revolution in Iran (1979), affecting his readership. Henceforth, the paper discusses the attitudes of the authors towards their reading public and argues how their ideas of nationalism and revolution color their eponymous political novels. While both these writers deal with politics and revolution, they maintain an individualistic stance towards ethical issues such as the power of human agency or responsibility. Their literary modernism also reveals itself in the subsequent evolution of contradictory ideas in their works. Not only do notional conflicts not cancel one another out, but they seem to assert the necessity and fruitful existence of such pluralism. As Cedric Watts observes, “in Conrad’s writing we see a combination of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century preoccupations; he stands at the intersection of the late Victorian and the early modernist cultural phases; he is both romantic and anti-romantic, both conservative and subversive” (Watts, 46). Similar to Conrad, Alavi is also a realist and an idealist, a romantic and an objective writer, especially in the third phase of his writing career.

Following Rousseau’s ideas of nation and people, Conrad believes a nation can only be conceived of by taking into due consideration the people who comprise it. But while Conrad glorifies nation, he considers individual people naïve, immature and the cause of social destruction. In his “war and

Autocracy” he blames ordinary people for violating the sanctity of intellectual practices (Conrad 73). When commenting on the French Revolution he states:

The parentage of that great social and political upheaval was intellectual, the idea was elevated: but it is the bitter fate of any idea to lose its royal form and power, to lose its ‘virtue’ the moment it descends from its solitary throne to work its will amongst the people. (ibid)

Such intellectual elitism is detectable in Alavi as well. However, his view of individualism is more positive than Conrad’s. For Alavi, a nation is certainly comprised of individuals, and these individuals are the only venue for change. Thus, although Conrad intently regards nation as sanctified, he treats people with conservative distrust, while Alavi entertains hope for individuals.

Ironically, while nation has the approbation of Conrad, nationalism is not without its misgivings. He is highly suspicious of “chauvinistic nationalisms” that threaten other nationalities with their policies of intolerance (Niland 99). The kind of nationalism practiced in Poland at the end of the 19th century and England’s imperialistic advances exemplify exclusive nationalist systems⁴. Alavi is also suspicious of radical notions, whether it is Marxism, communism or nationalism. However, Alavi’s egalitarian attitude is spoiled with a class-based view of society. As a Marxist, he believes a nation is not only made of individuals, but also constituted of different classes, and social class plays a deterministic role in the trajectory each individual follows in his/her life.

Both these writers are precursors of modernism and both have been influential on the generations of writers that followed them. Hence, critical works on both abound; either Alavi’s socialist attitudes are represented or his position as an early modernist is discussed. Conrad is scrutinized more often and has a wider range of literary influences than Alavi⁵. In this paper, the two novels, *Her Eyes* and *The Secret Agent* are viewed as dynamized by their writer’s attitude to the question of nationalism and Socialism and by extracting the writer’s political notions from their characters. The paper also shows how each work contradicts surface political premises. Underneath these contradictions, however, lies idealism: this idealism resides, in Alavi’s case, in his essentialist belief in reality and in Conrad, in his Romantic prophetic stance

as a writer who can see through reality and discover that there is no satisfaction in idealism.

An overview of the two novels:

Her Eyes

In his masterpiece *Her Eyes*, Alavi recreates the social and political milieu of Reza Shah's rule in Iran (1925-1941) and elucidates the way it affects the life of an artist who is, according to Ali Akbar Kasmaei, an example of "a deep soul and a complete man" (Kasmaei 86). In *Her Eyes* the suppressive and fascistic desires of a kingship to break the spirit of man is reflected in a victim of social crassness, Ostad Makan; a character that is above the ordinary man and is tortured because of his sensitive soul and his refusal to practice slavish acquiescence (ibid 85-6). To find the painter and the political activist, Farangis, the daughter of a well-to-do man, comes back to Iran from Paris. The beauty, who used to turn down her avid lovers, is now enchanted by the old and strict Makan, but he avoids her love for political reasons. To attract the attention of the painter, Farangis gets entangled in Socialist political activities against her father's desire. Sometime after Makan acknowledges his love, he is captured and sentenced to death. But, Farangis, without Makan ever realizing her sacrifice, helps him get exiled instead by accepting to marry Aram, the officer who could save Makan's life. Makan dies in exile and Farangis feels bitten by the past. At the end of the story, when she is recounting her life story to the guardian of the museum in which Makan's paintings are protected, she comes to an understanding: the famous picture of the eyes Makan had painted, presumably from *her* eyes, and for which she had come back to Iran and to the museum, are not hers. On telling her and Makan's life story to the guardian, she comes to a deeper understanding of man's nature, and sets her own character as well as that of Ostad Makan under the scrutiny of the readers (Kasmaei 92; Mirsadeghi 613).

The Secret Agent

The Secret Agent is the story of human confusion and inertia in face of political extremism. Mr. Verloc runs a pornography store with his wife Winnie. She was his landlady's daughter, and now Mr. Verloc lives with his wife and her mother and retarded brother, Stevie. Mr. Verloc is also a secret agent, working for both

the revolutionaries, who are a group controlled from Russia and the police force. Mr. Verloc is chosen to carry out a terroristic attack on the Greenwich Meridian Observatory to create an uproar against the foreign revolutionaries, active in exile in England. Conrad criticizes both the anarchists and the “vigilance” and “repressive measures” of the police, on which the identity and effective existence of the anarchists depends; as mentioned in the novel, the “leniency of the police” will bring “scandal” to the anarchists in Europe (19). Mr. Verloc chooses his retarded brother-in-law to carry out the mission, but on the way to the proposed location, Stevie trips over the roots of a tree and falls with the bomb in his hands. The explosion, although not at the desired site, creates the turmoil Mr. Vladimir, representing the tsarist Russian regime, sought after, but to the cost of Mr. Verloc and his wife’s death; Winnie kills her husband who is revealed to have committed such scandalous act with a retarded boy, and finally kills herself out of fear of execution after being abused by an Anarchist womanizer, Ossipon. At the closing scene of the novel, Comrade Ossipon and the Professor – the master Anarchist – who carries a bomb with himself all the time, remain.

Discussion

Bozorg Alavi, the Iranian novelist of the twentieth century, lived in an era of social political upheaval. When young he went to Germany in 1922 and after a five-year sojourn returned to Iran under the Pahlavid rule. In 1953 when a *coup de tat* toppled down Mossadegh’s government, Bozorg Alavi had already left Iran for Berlin for good⁶. During this time of interim residence in Iran, he produced the bulk of his oeuvre. Alavi has a "strong sense of mission" to enlighten the Iranian people; "I know I cannot write about flowers and nightingales," he said, in part as a reaction to the content of much of traditional writing, and in part as a response to his immediate milieu (Sandler 248). His sense of nationalism is humanistic and absolutist and he shows greater trust in human nature than Conrad.

The closing years of Reza Shah’s rule was a time of fervent nationalism⁷ and skepticism towards England and Russia which went hand in hand with an intensely praised westernization (Foran 337). This historical episode is also notable because it prepared the literary atmosphere of Iran for a Marxist taste

and socialist realism, which swelled out rapidly. Besides the pungent critical dressing of its literature, mounting concerns about the exploited and browbeaten masses drew many artists to socialist realism. At this time, words were so burdensome that Alavi gave up writing for politics and referred to writing as imprisonment (Sandler 248). Until 1953, when he left Iran, he entertained hope in the effectiveness and necessity of political engagement. However, late in life, while living in Berlin, Alavi lamented wasting his youth on political activism.

Unlike Alavi, Conrad was fully suspicious of socialist thought with its international and Universalist ideology. He left his country for good and settled in England and since he saw socialism a danger to nationalist ideas, grew a penchant for English Liberal tradition, which was nationalistic in core (Lewis 105). Yet his view of English nationalism is critical; He sees radical nationalism as refutation of other nation's rights to liberty and independence, which is against the liberalist ideals of freedom and equality. England was an imperialist country just like the tsarist Russia and thus Conrad's love of this nation could only be provisional. Along with his specific sense of nationalism, Aurom Fleishman believes "liberal individualism" is also a part of his mentality (qtd. in Lewis 103). Fleishman detects in Conrad the ethos of an "organic community, the work ethic, and the critique of individualism", while Ian Watt believes Conrad's communitarian beliefs are not at odds with his individualism (97-103). His novel *The Secret Agent* represents a fully-grown picture of his critical nationalist sentiments towards England.

Politics and Idealism: Prophetic Hindsight

Alavi is considered one of the first three writers that started a new trend of novel writing along with Sadiq Hedayat (1903-1951) and Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997) in Iran. Yet he is different from the two others in his belief in dynamism and movement, which is an influence from the Marxist ideas of Taqi Erani⁸. The three works he composed in the middle period of his activities, including *Prison Scraps*, *Letters* and *Her Eyes*, all contain characters who try to effect changes. Mirsadeghi describes the characters in these novels as follows: "Bozorg Alavi has tried to arouse his characters against cruelty and social malice and inspire them to resist and fight privation and adversity⁹" (615). Thus, Alavi creates characters who are not wrapped in pessimistic inertia

- unlike the trend laid down by Hedayat to whose style Alavi had some early fascination. Yet the optimistic vigor that strengthens his characters in the middle period of his literary activities damps down in his third phase. In the works Alavi produces later in his life, characters are rather depressed and disappointed. This trajectory in which Alavi moves takes him from a “romantic individualism” and “pessimism” to a sort of “optimistic socialism” and a final mature yet disconsolate view of both (ibid 618-20). *Her Eyes*, being a transitional work¹⁰, experiences the move to a final distrust. Still, Alavi remained loyal to socialist beliefs even after the Second World War, and propagated notions of worldwide peace and cooperation (Azhand 91-2).

In *Her Eyes*, Alavi lays bare the relation between an artist and a political activist. Ostad Makan is a character with two sides; from one hand, he is a highly perceptive painter who has an idealistic notion of realism¹¹ and on the other hand, he is a strict political activist following socialism and fighting against social ills and dictatorial callousness. Alavi’s intellectual elitism colors his socialism and we perceive a trace of his belief in individualism in the character of Ostad Makan. Makan is a solitary figure and his life style has nothing to do with a communal stance. He is also burdened with some prophetic missions, thus he is informed with Alavi’s idealism about heroic characters, a reminiscence of his Romantic notions¹²; Ostad Makan uses art as a teleological apparatus to reach his prophetic goals. He has portrayed his servant, Agha Rajab, and the narrator explains the aim as follows: “His face looks calm and impassable. Ostad has tried to picture his nature but the observer grasps nothing¹³” (34). Ostad Makan carries the same intention in mind when he portrays Farangis.

The face was an attractive woman’s, but what enchanted the onlookers was not the splendor of the face, it was the mystery and enigma in the eyes. The eyes were narrow and slanted. Sometimes, mocking the observers’ imagination, they revealed a woman who was tormenting the painter. Then it aroused your repulsion. (26)

Alavi has an essentialist stance towards reality. In both paintings, he has tried to penetrate deep into the soul of the people and display their inner reality

on the canvas. Accordingly, throughout the novel there is an obsession with detecting and revealing reality. However, the central character of the story is a woman whose true name is not revealed to the end – Farangis is just a name she uses to hide her real identity – and this character remains a puzzle to Ostad Makan as well as to the reader. Although she tells her life story and the work is dominantly what she recounts, the reader will have her own interpretation of her identity and intention. Therefore, the novel asserts and undermines expectations created in the reader by the use of socialist realism techniques.

Alavi's novel is generally classified as socialist realism, consequently it is replete with the contradictions existing in Marxism; although Alavi believes in the power of human agency to bring changes in the society, and idealizes activity and dynamism against subservient acceptance of present conditions, the deterministic effect of social class remains an eradicable force¹⁴. Farangis is doomed to failure because she comes from a bourgeois social class and this class cannot produce real artists. Farangis used to practice painting. When she goes to Makan and shows her paintings to him, he treats her with disdain:

I expected him to show me his art pieces, to treat me cordially like all others, reciprocate my smiles, and insist on my return to see him again or at least to find fault with my sketches. Quite the reverse. The more I tarried, the colder he grew. Smile withered on my lips. His behavior was demeaning. As if he insulted me unintentionally. What made him detest me?

When I introduced myself and told him my father's name, he retorted: "Oh! You're the daughter of Amir Hezarkuhi Mazandarani. So you paint?" (95)

Thus it seems that the determinism in a socialist's view would draw Alavi to a reductive attitude towards different social classes. Yet he pronounces doubt to every single belief he puts forth. For a socialist, people are able when they have socialist energy inside, yet Farangis who is from the bourgeoisie, and apparently is the enemy of the socialists, affects the most change. Although her humanity is questioned, she is capable of great sacrifices. On the other hand, Ostad Makan, who is the representative of true socialist humanism and claims to have access to the soul of everybody he portrays¹⁵, falls victim to his own

arrogance and reductionist views. This skeptic view about communitarian regimes comes from the force of the locality in which the concept – communism – was used; under the colonial and imperial power of England, the Soviet Union and later Germany, the developing country of Iran interfused international and Universalist communism with national concerns. It is repeatedly mentioned in Alavi's novel that Makan is fighting to free his country from the dictatorial power of the rulers, obviously, a critique of Reza Shah and his suppressive regime¹⁶.

Apart from being oriented towards national concerns, Alavi's communitarian stance is polluted with his tenacious pursuit of social hierarchy. On his way to fight off social inequality, Makan needs to reveal to people their inner potential for bringing change, yet there is no sign of belief in the eradication of inequalities or hierarchies. What Alavi is against, is the *present* hierarchy. He himself, who comes from a well-to-do family, cherishes some of the characteristics of this class, even though it seems that he criticizes all bourgeois attributes in Farangis and his wealthy father. He describes Farangis as "the leftover of a society in which she glowed" (49). Conversely, he describes Ostad Makan as a very neat man who uses perfume and perfect apparel. His behavior is cultivated though sometimes eccentric. His eccentricity actually works to create an aura of grandeur around him.

Suddenly he left the gathering without any excuse. Yet he was friendly to all. When he felt innocence and purity of soul, he got deeply enamored. He was a partner of people's sorrows. He could lower himself to their state and be their most benevolent comrade. He helped them and was concerned about them. (49)

And finally his status among people was so elevated that at formal public gatherings high officials, in order to gain popularity among people, tried to associate themselves with him. Still this superhuman is a contradiction in terms. He is a man and theoretically equal to all other citizens, but Alavi attributes privileges of character to him that separate him from the masses for whom he is fighting. Although the writer tries to show that Makan's behavior towards his servant and his family was an example of equality and humanness, Makan's

failure to see that a servant is inevitably a person providing services to another, makes him a critique rather than an assertion of the idea of a pure socialist.

Ostad Makan's superiority to ordinary people is first asserted through his gift of art. He has the power to pierce inside man's heart and understand them. Makan, in this sense, becomes a Romantic prophet figure. However, his humanity is finally asserted when he makes a grave mistake about judging Farangis. His cynic view of Farangis's social class and his doubts over her intentions to cooperate with their political group and his paralysis in accepting her love pulls him to the portrayal of a picture from her eyes that are open to diverse interpretations, but it seems that most observers read the work as tormenting eyes of a whore.

Why did he paint those eyes? Did he want to send his beloved a gift as a sign of his silent love and fidelity? Or did he want to tell the one who had captured his soul with her eyes that I eventually know you, so deeply that even you wouldn't recognize, and I know that you are the reason for my suffering today. Or probably he wants to say: "oh, eyes, if your owners would have been with me, I could endure and be fulfilled." (28)

With all his nuanced consciousness about human character and its contradictions and frailties, Alavi remains an optimist. Interestingly while a liberal's view of change and progress and individualism is quite positive, a socialist¹⁷ has a negative attitude to such changes. Thus we expect that Conrad who was more a liberalist to be optimistic and Alavi the socialist minded writer a pessimist¹⁸. But Alavi shows more optimism than Conrad. Conrad is actually considered a very pessimist writer. Their treatment of love and passion and their depiction of familial bounds exhibit their different stances, which provide Alavi's works with more optimism than Conrad's.

Ironically, love is an inseparable part of Alavi's novel, and attests to the optimistic belief of Alavi in change. Farangis, an attractive girl who snubs at all his suitors falls in love with Ostad Makan, a painter and a political activist. She drowns herself in politics in pursuit of her love for Makan. She confesses her own bourgeois attitudes: "inside me, the genius for painting was lacking and the social atmosphere in which I lived had hollowed me of any power and

diligence. I finally understood this fact” (122). She also acknowledges that: “I didn’t have any interest in the fate of this nation, and these people’s agony never moved my heart. I was not their partner in their pain and sorrow...there was no connection whatsoever between me and the scums filling this country” (151-2). Yet she is changed after she falls in love with Makan. She starts to work assiduously, “three weeks, seven hours of hard work every day”, when Makan asks her to learn typing and to type the letters he intends to publish in public (168). Makan’s survival was also the outcome of a lover’s sacrifice for her beloved; by marrying Aram, she helps Makan. Aram intended to kill him but in return for what Farangis offers him, he accepts to send Makan to exile. In this way love provides political activism with the needed force to move, and is rejuvenated by the same political activity. Unlike Alavi, Conrad depicts family life a burden and a sham obligation. Love is almost non-existent or ineffective. Winnie marries Mr. Verloc because she thinks he has the economic power to take care of her, her old mother and retarded brother. She is capable of killing her husband when she realizes that his brother is killed and her husband is not blameless for that. While Alavi unites love and politics and makes each one a propellant force to the other, Conrad regards them as separate worlds that should not interfere with one another. Anarchists just like socialists believe that the only way to carry out their political tasks successfully is to be bereft of love. But Mr. Verloc is married:

Married! And you professed anarchist, too! What is this confounded nonsense? ... Anarchists don’t marry. It’s well known. They can’t. It would be apostasy. (33)

The interference of these two spheres is catastrophic for Conrad, but a possible salvation for Alavi. In both novels, the man dies and the woman fails to reach what she craved for, but they reveal differing degrees of humanity in their lives and deaths. Still this attitude may be reductionist if we consider that socialism requires a forsaking of familial bounds for a higher aim. In a communitarian group, the community stands as the priority, subsequently the individuals and their personal predilections pale into insignificance. Farangis is a love-seeker, but Makan escapes familial relations. He has already forsaken his family to live a lonely life of political commitment. Thus, although love of

Makan draws Farangis into Politics, Makan remains largely unaffected. Alavi implicitly criticizes such radical socialist views that kill off individuality. Such passions for sacrifice and altruism, of course was not an influence from Marxist socialism or communism, but the trend of Iranian mystic culture that feeds on the concepts of sacrifice and priority of communal goals and the importance of spiritual truth over private affairs. Therefore, Alavi's culturally rooted mysticism tints his communism.

In Conrad's novel, familial life is not wholly questioned either. Love buds, but the force of capitalism parches it. Mr. Verloc seems to love his family and means no harm to Stevie, but his intentions are undercut by the existence of a universal power that brings every single act of people to disaster. The world of Conrad's characters moves on distrust and misunderstanding. Still for Conrad there is no essential human passion such as love, as there is for Alavi. In Conrad, love is more a pragmatic concern. Love, like other human happenings, is devoid of essential truth. In Conrad's world, no passion can bring real change. Verloc and Winnie's marriage ends in what everyone is escaping from. But this desire to escape tragedy never takes the form of active resistance. In contrast, lethargy is the dominant atmosphere of the novel. Although the work is about a terroristic attack, the reader does not find the sort of dynamism one expects from such narratives. The feeling of torpor and apathy that resides over the love relations of people is extended to their political and social existence. All characters are described more or less as static; Winnie's look is indifferent and she remains passive to whatever comes by her in life; her old mother is "rendered inactive" because of her swollen legs; Inspector Heat, who is not capable of finding the answer to the question of the explosion, concocts evidence against a person who is not the direct dealer in this event; Mr. Verloc himself seeks a life of ease and comfort far from the dynamism expected from a revolutionary or a double agent. He remains motionless as if he is surrounded by pitfalls. When Mr. Verloc sees a buzzing over the window he gets disturbed:

The useless fussing of that tiny energetic organism affected unpleasantly this big man threatened in his indolence. (26)

Or:

... Mr. Verloc's immobility by the side of the armchair resembled a state of collapsed coma - a sort of passive insensibility interrupted by slight convulsive starts. (31)

Michaelies is Conrad's mouthpiece in this novel. Although he talks from a sharply Marxist point of view, yet his attitude towards the socio-political forces that create reaction is similar to Conrad's. "Capitalism has made socialism, and the laws made by Capitalism for the protection of property are responsible for anarchism" (37), he says. Yet this very anarchism is doomed. At the closing scene of the novel the professor sheds light on the reason why anarchists fail: "All passion is lost now. The world is mediocre, limp, without force" (146). This mediocrity that engulfs all and exerts a sort of deadening similarity on characters is a cause of rampant pessimism in the novel. Both groups of characters in *The Secret Agent*, the agents of the central government and the revolutionaries, are mentally the same. Thus, Conrad's pessimism reveals itself sharply. In the introduction Martin Seymour-Smith wrote to *The Secret Agent*, he referred to this similarity:

The Secret Agent is extraordinarily 'modern' in the jaundiced view it takes of political activists, of respectable politicians, of policemen, and even of the sacred institution of meaning.
(4)

As Seymour-Smith wisely asserts they are the two sides of the same coin. This sameness itself adds to the atmosphere of lethargy, and pre-empts the possibility of change. The bomb, which is the symbol of change, explodes where it affects the least influence. The geographical displacement of the site in which the bomb explodes parallels the adjourned explosion of bombs the high anarchist, the Professor, carries with himself. As the proper time does not arrive for the Professor, the proper place is never reached by Stevie. Thus, a parallelism of being retarded and professionalism is created in which both cancel each other out (Berthoud 138-41). Stevie, unlike Faulkner's Benji¹⁹, is no transcendent mind, but a fearful and irritable soul that does not comprehend his environment, and the professor is not the calm awesome man he may seem. Therefore, characters seem to nullify each other and intensify inability.

While Conrad pictures all his characters as mundane and mediocre, Alavi, in an idealistic spasm on which his desire for freedom rests, brings the intelligentsia who has broken with the monarchy to the masses. For Conrad

intelligence is a sham, thus his idealistic road to freedom is blocked with his turn-of-the-century view of man as a mere product of his milieu plunged in illusions of having effects on the world outside. Although these characters are supposed to be anarchists, destructive energy is what most acutely is wanting in them. As Conrad puts it in the afterword to his novels, he has tried to create "shams" and not true revolutionaries (Schnauder 22). As Schnauder remarks these characters "lack the power or the will to recognize what should at least cause a measure of disturbance" (24). Hence, inertia inundating the world of the story.

In Alavi's work, characters are represented from different casts. Farangis is a wealthy girl coming from a well-to-do family who has been in Europe for some time and has spent her life playing with youths who fall in love with her. She is represented as a source of energy that invigorates all around her. The kind of relation she develops with Makan is significant in that Makan is a man with all his faith and devotion to the masses. Makan is actually the enemy of Farangis, but she has taken apart from her family and is following the painter-activist's path. These two characters are depicted with vigor and each reveals a trait that sheds light on the impossibility of perfection. Like Conrad's characters these people are gray, but Conrad's are plunged in their un-heroic life, while Alavi's are capable of heroism and sacrifice. Alavi's characters affect one another in different ways, while in Conrad's novel people are powerless to bring any changes. Conrad's characters desire freedom and peace and this is what Alavi's characters strive after, too. However, for Conrad liberty is a fantastic lore that no one can grasp, and the only fruit it bears is "despair, desolation, and corruption" (Seymour-Smith 2). Yet, Alavi retains his hope in the attainability of freedom. Makan dies in exile but never paints a bourgeoisie or an agent of the kingship. His shady image of the two eyes, represent the problematic characterization of Farangis as an agent of revolution or monarchy, honesty or fraudulence. Yet at the same time, it reveals the perfect man Ostad Makan, an agent of socialist activities and the enemy of vicissitude and suppression as unqualified to picture Farangis who made a sacrifice for his sake. The story finishes with Farangis's remarks about denouncing the painted eyes as hers; an act that shows her defeat in following Makan to exile and his revolutionary nationalist path, and at the same time an understanding that

Makan was not the demy-god she believed in. Nevertheless, their love remains genuine throughout the story.

Revolution: Illegitimate Heirs of the Throne

Conrad's political works are on the subject of revolutionary actions, and the way he depicts his characters reveals his stance to the question of revolution. In *The Secret Agent*, Mr. Verloc is in direct association with an anarchist group while he is not one himself, or as becomes clear, does not wish to be characterized as one. But like the major characters in many other novels of his, like *Lord Jim* and *Under Western Eyes*, he becomes a character misjudged and pursues a path which finally leads him to the conclusion he avoids. In *Lord Jim*, Jim tries to escape the fate of a betrayer, but he is widely remembered as such. In *Under Western Eyes*, Razumov wishes to be a compliant citizen but becomes associated with the anarchists. Mr. Verlock also desires the security and calmness at home by distancing himself from the outrageous revolutionary acts the anarchists aim at committing, but finally he is chosen as the agent to carry out the task. In all these works, Conrad disparages radical "lawlessness" of the anarchists as a reaction to and yet an outcome of autocracy that inverts the situation but does not heal the problems (G. H. Bantock 135).

Conrad sees no genuine communal agreement over the cause of a revolution. It seems to him that there is always someone behind a "creed":

The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared
by personal impulses disguised into creeds. (Conrad 75)

Mr. Verloc is against radical anarchistic acts, thus Williams has to force him to act. Williams, who is the embodiment of the revolutionary creed, takes his ideas from a higher agent in the group. Down the stairs of anarchist hierarchy, faith into revolutionary action slackens, and what happens is a mere mess of a plan. Stevie who carries the bomb in a tin is an ignorant and unwilling agent of an anarchist action. He neither wants, probably, nor can be a part of this action. In this way, the picture Conrad draws of the revolutionaries is one of disinterest and indolence

The Secret Agent is a novel through which the formation of the West as a concept is shown to take shape. The revolutionaries in London are a Russian

clan of terrorists who aim at destroying the elitist hierarchy and order of England. Thus, the Western civilization defines itself against the disorder and vulgarity of an Other (GoGwilt 91). Still Conrad reveals no strong nationalistic sentiments for the England he tries to associate himself with. Mr. Verloc is English and a double agent. The police force is also tedious in its failures. Conrad does not discredit revolutionary proceedings to admit its extreme other, which is autocratic rule. For him the English are as liable to imperialistic advances as is Russia. Conrad defines himself in his outlook to the convolutions of the world events and people's motives as "modern", therefore it would not be easy to accept a one way reading of his notions about revolutionaries. As is stated by Schnauder, Conrad is neither "a traditional conservative *nor* a radical skeptic", "he hovers somewhere over all the contingencies and contradictions that may exist in reality" (81). Being prone to epistemological doubts of the modernists and having a paradoxical national sentiment for the land he writes about, cause Conrad's general stance towards revolutionary action to be one of distrust and pessimism. For him "all heirs of revolution must necessarily be illegitimate." "Frequently futile sacrifices exacted by political action" in Conrad's political novels attest to his view of revolution as radically utopian action rooted in illusory ideas (ibid 90). Unlike Conrad, Alavi is troubled with the thought that his homeland is oppressed. If he desires freedom, it is a collective hope that encompasses the people who inhabit a certain soil.

As realism is far removed from the naïve classification that puts directly and outwardly social realist works against private works of non-realism, political fiction also transcends the boundary between outwardly political works and internally private ones. G. H. Bantock discusses the close relation between public and private spheres of action showing the radicalism of separatist views:

The public world of action and policy comprises as an immensely important part of its 'reality' a vast complex of private hopes and fears, some fantastically remote from the ostensible and admitted reasons for their outward manifestations, so that the public happening may bear a scarcely recognizable relationship to the actual motive force which has set it in being; for, in the pursuit of a private aim,

the public and overt act may well come to be, in effect, a mere by-product of a desire for notoriety, or a wish to be well thought of, a lust for power or a search for reputation.(123)

Conrad is also a writer that embodies the complex workings of a political discourse. The lack of “a basic reality” for Conrad gives his works a strong skeptic edge and justifies the ironic destabilization of his characters’ actions and intentions. For him political action necessarily interfuses the private within the public domain. In his *The Secret Agent*, this notion is demonstrated openly in the tangle of a secret agent’s private life, thoughts and desires and the outward plans of terroristic actions, which agitate his serene life style. Although it seems that Conrad as a writer believed in some sort of conservatism, yet his works hover on the contemporary portrait of an unattainable ideal life in which reality has lost its hold and individuals are lost in the web of uncertainty over the morally correct actions to be taken (ibid 125). Mr. Vladimir is explicitly at a loss over what is right to be done:

Mr Vladimir developed his idea from on high, with scorn and condescension, displaying at the same time an amount of ignorance as to the real aims, thoughts, and methods of the revolutionary world which filled the silent Mr Verloc with in-ward consternation. He confounded causes with effects more than was excusable. (44)

Characters often do not have any sense of reality and see from the veil of their inner world, yet Conrad reveals no intention of implying that such reality ever exists; not for the reason that he was a non-believer in the existence of truth, but because on his way to explore reality he had to doubt all conviction (Haugh 273). Although conservative in his image of an ideal communal structure, Conrad questions the existence of such reality, thus characters seem to go through an unavoidable path. Stevie is represented as “purely honest” incapable of thinking evil, and the narrator emphasizes that “he had formed for himself an ideal conception of the metropolitan police as a sort of benevolent institution for the suppression of evil” (186). Stevie’s being retarded and getting blown up

all show the mockery that lies at the heart of such idealism. Irony in works of Conrad, originate from this view of the world. While characters move to their demise in ignorance of the outcomes and ends, the reader is aware of the doom be-waiting them. The characters usually fail to see the problem to the end and deny the disparity between their ideal view of the world and what an ideal world may mean to a hundred other characters. Mr. Verloc thinks Winnie loves him for himself, while we know the pragmatism behind this love. The constant use of the word idealistic to describe the family life of Winnie, already prognosticate a forthcoming annihilation of this idealism. When Verloc moves towards choosing Stevie as the agent of destruction, we already recognize the mistake. And while the anarchists aim to bring about “an ideal attack” on the society, they destroy the Verlocs’ private life in the first place.

Alavi is also a deeply idealist writer. His desire to reveal the truth about Makan’s paralysis to understand, exposes itself by making Farangis have a long confession of her life story. In this confession, the quality of the interrelation between public and private spheres of life is uncovered. Makan’s private life as an artist is intricately linked to his political fate: “if Iranians today would know...the great Iranian painter had bridged his fate to that of his nation, they would be encouraged” (64). However, “nobody truly knew who he was. Nobody had ever entered his private life” (31). He had left his family in Mazandaran²⁰ and felt no obligations towards a conjugal life. His fate – death in exile – is not a direct outcome of his puny feelings for Farangis, but his refusal to entertain the Shah and the official’s whims. When Shah goes to see his paintings, Makan ignores him, which enrages the Shah: “the mighty Shah came back to talk to Ostad in person. He was standing in the gallery lighting a cigarette. Shah was picked...Makan was rebuked and encouraged to run to the Shah...to ask forgiveness...he made no haste, so the Shah left. This event finally lead...to his exile to Kalat and his subsequent death in that village” (32-3). Nevertheless, the political activist Makan is recognizable when located in the context of the private life of Farangis: “I see that your lives are intertwined. To know Ostad, one needs to know you” (103), the guardian remarks. Farangis herself describes her life as “a chapter of a book”, a book that tells of Makan’s life and work, which is “not yet closed” (105).

Like Conrad, Alavi also creates irony. All over his novel, he plays with the intelligence and understanding of the reader. The characters that emerge defy

the reader's early judgments in the end, as the picture of Farangis's eyes eventually seem different to the guardian of the museum. The most ironic scene in the novel is created when Farangis trusts the guardian and pours her heart out to him, believing he is unaffected by her beauty and is treating her like a human being: "do you know why I decided to tell you everything? Because you are the third man in my life, besides Makan, who does not thirst for my body when he looks into my eyes." (104). Nonetheless, just after this remark the guardian of the museum allows himself a thorough look: "she closed her eyes and I cast a covetous look to her body. Slim nose. Sable curly hair, delicate lips and a slight make up. Proportionate body, though a little short. Trim legs, all was charming and magical" (104). Even before that, in their first encounter the guardian who had thought her to be a prostitute had wished to exchange the painting with a night with her. "How much I longed to tell her: lady, give me a kiss and take the painting with you. No, this wench does not understand me. How much I yearned to tell her: lady, be with me for a night and the painting is yours" (77).

Farangis has sacrificed her youth and love for Makan, yet she is not sure whether what she did was correct or enough: "maybe I caused his death. Maybe I was deceived. Maybe nobody wanted to kill him. Maybe he would only be exiled. And if I had been with him, he was still alive" (97). While it comes to Conrad's view about revolutionary action, he bears the same attitude as Alavi; all people follow what they believe to be correct and a salvation. However, their ideas may counteract each other and bring about unwanted results. This creates the crux of irony in their works. Thus, man is depicted as powerless over the world in which he lives, the reality of which is made by the collective actions and interactions of all individuals inhabiting it.

In their own way the most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing no more but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind - the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience.
(Conrad 75)

As a result, Conrad is a strong skeptic when the question of revolutionary radicalism is put forward. Conrad refutes the plausibility of radicalism as a counteractive measure against misrule. For him anarchism is itself a sort of

misrule. Still one cannot say Conrad believes in a middle way between the two poles of radicalism, since his skepticism does not allow such optimism to grow. For Conrad the reality of life is what people in their intentional actions and inadvertent doings and their unconscious aims and desires make of it. What finally comes about defies representation and total understanding. Mr. Verloc is finally killed, but not by the anarchists who doubt his faithfulness to their ideals, or the tsarist regime which pays him for his double agency. Mrs. Verloc stabs him to death because he shatters all her hopes and illusions. Revolution for Conrad is very much like Mrs. Verloc's act of hysteric action. Although it is prompted as a reaction to the wrongs and undue justifications of the state policies, yet it leads to defeat. Mrs. Verloc succeeds in dismantling her husband, but is finally prostituted by Ossipon and dies. Thus, the very structure of the novel reveals Conrad's ideas about radicalism of any sort. Just like Conrad that represents his idea of revolution and political action through the analogue of his feminine character, Alavi, too, associates the vigor and waywardness of Farangis with the bursting force of revolution. As the question of the owner of the eyes and her identity is revealed only gradually, the fate of a nation is also dependent on measured reformations, and not on an overnight revolution.

Conrad never claimed nor accepted the contention that he was writing as contemplation on the political and philosophical function and essence of anarchism. Unlike Dostoyevsky, who influenced Conrad and strenuously tried to assert that his works were working on the contemporary reality and embodied "truth", Conrad called his own works pure fiction with no political or philosophical backdrop. He subtitled his novel "A Simple Tale". This is as a result of the conclusion he has reached in his experience of the world; that "identifiable reality does not exist, just different versions of it, and that truth is a mere word play and essentially non-existent". This notion permeates his works and gives this novel a deep modernist edge (Howe 5). Conrad reveals his notion of revolution in the lines taken from his novel *Under Western Eyes*:

For that is the mark of Russian autocracy and of Russian revolt. In its pride of numbers, in its strange pretensions of sanctity. And in the secret readiness to abuse itself in suffering is the spirit of cynicism. (Conrad 67)

Conclusion

By comparing Conrad and Alavi in their view of revolution and radical political praxis, the article probes into the workings of not only literature but also the cultural politics of two nations on the two poles of an imperialist relation: one considered a Western thus central nation, the other a Middle Eastern and peripheral. Hence, bringing together two central premises of modern comparative scholarship: multi-nationality and trans-literary traditions. While set on the opposing frontiers, Conrad and Alavi converge in qualities that give a palatable taste to their comparison. The two writers, claiming literary modernism in their belief “that human beings may act as subjects of history, rather than having their fortunes determined by fate, custom, tradition, or religion.” (Newman 4), represent their ideals of a better world in their works while both believe conceptual oppositions are doomed to defeat. Whether one is a national Marxist or a national liberalist, ignorance of fault lines is considered pedantic. Alavi shows strong communitarian proclivities, yet what he aims at is the depiction of humanity from a critical point of view. Conrad is also a master of portraying man in his multi-dimensional existence. Yet each reveals his idealism through different techniques of critically positive representation, as in the case of Alavi, or negative withdrawal like Conrad. What finally transcends in both artists the mundane clash of ideologies is the attempt at representation of the impossible, which makes both idealist writers.

The cultural location of each of the two writers, however, molds their works differently. Conrad defines revolution as, “a short cut to the rational development of national needs in response to the growth of world-wide ideals.” (Najder 124). Penetration of the global knowledge within the fabric of a nation and their final awareness of and request for a better and more just society leads to uprisings for reform. And if reform be excluded from the discourse of a government, as it usually is in Conrad’s view, its body will easily shatter under the weight of demands for improvements. Such as “the autocracy of Holy Russia” for which “the only self-reform is suicide” (Magill 7). For Conrad, all characters are imbecile because the legality that has produced them is so, and revolution is thus a failure. Yet Alavi sees the masses as an entity for itself, not produced by the governmental force; this freedom of the mass man, which is in turn an impetus to his sense of nationalism, rally around his belief in revolution.

Thus, in the encounter between a European literary work with its third world other, both entangled in the vexed question of nationalism, cultural displacement of the writers allow the line of imperialism to be cut short and the two poles brought closer. Now that the two works address nationalism, it would be fruitful to stress the fact that if the writers' stance towards nationalism in their respective countries were not nuanced, shortening the distance between the two poles would not be conceivable. Jonathan Culler wisely reminds its audience on a conference on Comparative literature that:

Once upon a time, when literary study was organized according to national literatures, comparative literature was defined differentially as the place where the study of literature was organized by other sorts of units: genres, periods, themes...[but] national literature soon became the site of literary theory, while the national literature departments frequently resisted- or at least resisted sorts of theory which did not emanate from their own cultural sphere.
(118)

Which, if would not alter, could bring the story of comparative literature to an immature end.

Note:

- ¹ Bijan Mumivand is among Iranian scholars who argues the abundance of leftist Muslims in Iran in comparison to liberal Muslims is not to be sought in the religious beliefs and ideas of the Iranians, but "in the social structure and political and economic relations of this nation. Since if religious dogmas were the criteria, indeed Marxism and communism are more in conflict with religious Islamic teachings." See "Why Liberalism Has Few Followers in Iran?" published in *Mehrnameh*, 18, 2011.
- ² An influential figure in the instigation of Liberalism in Iran, a modernist and a father of Iranian Constitutional revolution.
- ³ Conrad was not well sold and he often had problems with publishers. Even when a work of his received acclaim by the critics, the audience was not enthusiastic about it.
- ⁴ In the 1980s in Poland, Dmowski's government took hold which was strongly anti-semitic in its National Democratic attitude. Therefore, late in the 19th century there is no trace of romantic humanitarian nationalism that once characterized Poland as a nation. Conrad is often associated with strong nationalistic feelings for Poland and his lack of national feelings for England are thus justified. However, his relation neither to Poland nor to England could have been easily definable. What shaped Conrad's attitude to these two nations was not a birth tie but his idea of correct nationalism.

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- ⁵ Jeffrey Meyers undertook to navigate through the novelists, playwrights and poets who have been influenced by Conrad in an article published in 1990. See "Conrad's Influence on Modern Writers". *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1990. 186-206.
- ⁶ He had two short visits to Iran in 1979 and 1980 after the Islamic revolution.
- ⁷ For the Iranian writers of Reza Shah's rule, freedom was closely associated with national sentiments. To be free meant to be shouting the pain the country was suffering under westernized notions of progress. Thus, even semi-communist parties followed a national urge. See Rivanne Sandler's "Literary Developments in Iran in the 1960s and the 1970s prior to the 1978 Revolution." P. 247.
- ⁸ Sometimes referred to as Dr. Erani
- ⁹ This and all other translations, including Alavi's quotations from his novel *Her Eyes* are all by the writers of the article.
- ¹⁰ Alavi wrote this novel in 1953, and critics like Mirsadeghi classify it as a novel that belongs to the second phase of his writings, along with *Prison Scraps* and *Letters*. However, it is a late novel in this period and after that Alavi produced works which were more dubious of effective political activism, like *Mirza* and *Salariha*, written in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively.
- ¹¹ In Alavi's stories, characters are often attributed with a heroic aura. This heroism and their subsequent supremacy over the masses is their intellectual power that allows them see reality. Thus even when creating a socialist work, Alavi's characters retain their sense of hierarchy.
- ¹² Meskub discusses in his book *Dastan-e Adabiat va Sargozasht-e Ejtema*, published in 1994 by Farzan Ruz publications, that during the time Alavi and Hedayat were writing, romantic nationalism was prevalent and not only critical writers like Alavi and Hedayat but also the mainstream political system of the Pahlavids used it to their own aims.
- ¹³ J. O'Kane translated Alavi's *Chashmahayash* as *Her Eyes*, however the translations used in this paper are by the writers of the article.
- ¹⁴ Bozorg Alavi was deeply influenced by the Socialist Dr. Erani, the leader of the Tudeh party in Iran. Under his influence, Alavi had a great mistrust of the bourgeoisie and could not reconcile his attitude towards an individual's potential to bring change with his radical socialist idea of a class-based society. Another communist premise Alavi could not reconcile himself with was Dr. Erani and his followers' distrust of nationalism. Alavi never gave up nationalism for communism. Alavi's final disillusionment made him react to his political life bitterly, lamenting the waste of his youth on politics.
- ¹⁵ When Dr. Erani was arrested with 52 other people, including Bozorg Alavi, who was just getting involved in political activities, he characterized his friends and himself as the oppressed and victimized intelligentsia. Thus after the Second World War, intellectual suppression and persecution entered literature as a theme. See Reza Ghods, "The Iranian Communist Movement under Reza Shah", p.510. Fascination with the role of the intelligentsia as a possible means of bringing consciousness to the masses dominates Alavi's novels, all of which incorporate characters from this social group.
- ¹⁶ Reza Shah is a controversial figure, for he started the process of modernization in Iran. He allowed England and Russia (The Soviet Union) to be present in the country and through different contracts, imported technology. However, these two countries started to advance their imperialism on the Iranian soil. Socialist realism was also imported into the country through the cultural door which was opened in Iran by the presence of the Russians especially in the Northern part of the country. Haleh Esfandiari in her review of

J. O'Kane's translation of *Chashmhayash* points out that sometime after the publication of this novel there were "whispers" that Makan was an amalgamation of Kamalol Molk, a great Iranian painter and Dr. Erani, Aram was actually Reza Shah's Chief of Police, General Ayrom and Kheiltash, another character in the story, was Reza Shah's Minister of Court, Taymurtash. See "Her Eyes by Bozorg Alavi: J. O'Kane," in *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1/4 (1990), pp. 130-2.

¹⁷ The Marxist Socialists who retained a dim hope for an automatic final revolution.

¹⁸ Socialist realism is famous for production of works with a gloomy atmosphere. Often the workers' lives are depicted and their hardships. Inequality and lack of justice are the dominant themes of this genre. Jalal Al Ahmed's collection of short stories are a good example of this trend in Iran.

¹⁹ Faulkner's character in his *The Sound and the Fury*.

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