

**INTERPRETING JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* IN THE LIGHT OF MARK SCHORER'S CRITICAL ESSAY '*TECHNIQUE AS DISCOVERY*'**

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Mark Schorer's essay 'Technique as Discovery' briefs the readers with the techniques employed by authors and their significance in accentuating the theme of the respective work of art. The beauty of a work of art is form or technique; whereas the content or the subject matter is its truth. Technique includes 'nearly everything' that is a part of a work of art. The author's experience compels him to attend to it only through technique. There are five vital things that the author can accomplish by virtue of technique:

- (i) discovery of his subject
- (ii) exploration of the subject
- (iii) development of subject
- (iv) conveyance of meaning
- (v) evaluation

The author capable of the most exacting technical scrutiny of his subject matter will produce works with the most satisfying content, works with thickness and resonance, works with maximum meaning. Language being an inseparable part of fiction serves two purposes:

- (i) to create a certain texture and tone which in themselves state and define themes and meanings
- (ii) language as forced through conscious manipulation into all those larger meanings which our ordinary speech almost never intends.

Technique, as Mark Schorer points out, should be viewed as a means of exploring and defining the values in an area of experience. It is hence to be thought of in two respects particularly:

- (i) the uses to which language, as language is put to express the quality of experience in question
- (ii) the uses of point of view not only as a mode of dramatic delimitation but more particularly of thematic definition.

Technique objectifies the materials of art and hence evaluates those materials. What we need in technique which will help us to discover and to evaluate our subject matter and

more than that to discover the amplification of meaning which our subject matter is capable. Schorer remarks,

“When we speak of technique, then, we speak of nearly everything. For technique is the means by which the writer’s experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally evaluating it. And surely it follows that certain techniques are sharper tools than others, and will discover more; that the writer capable of the most exacting technical scrutiny of his subject matter, will produce works with the most satisfying content, works with thickness and resonance, works which reverberate, works with maximum meaning.”

(Schorer, 387)

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we come across his choice of words and word combinations, his poetic tone and suave style which craft a sensual experience. *Heart of Darkness* is a story that connects the audience to the narrator's senses. We come to understand the environment, the setting, the other characters and Kurtz strictly from the narrator's point-of-view, as he sees and experiences things. Conrad's subtle use of technique makes the novel gripping and readable. The theme is racism and the white man's dominance over "the dark continent". The entire novel is made up of layers, each unleashing a series of interpretations. The novel is in the form of concentric circles with Kurtz's inner station at the center. It takes a great deal of endurance on the part of the reader to decipher the narrator in the opening pages of the novel. The entry into the text is not that easy; may be this draws a striking parallel to the fact that Conrad's portrayal of Africa also shows that it is impenetrable.

The opening pages of the novel introduce us to another narrator on board 'The Nellie' accompanied by Marlow, the captain i.e. the Director of Companies, the lawyer and the Accountant. Conrad has skillfully juggled with the two narrators in the course of the novel. Then the flashback technique is introduced by means of Marlow's narration. The description of the dark continent is fantastic. This is where Conrad's use of language comes live. He has implemented poetic techniques such as repetition, rhythm, image and symbolic pattern.

Speaking of the contemporary political milieu, colonialism, materialism, capitalism and imperialism were in their boom period. African countries were "brutally raped" by the Europeans. Derogatory words and phrases like "black figures", "cannibals", "nigger" have been used to describe those inmates. They are not perceived as a whole, instead being portrayed only as parts.

"Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees,

stared at nothing in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of concerted collapse, as if some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone." (Pg 44)

The post colonial writers rebel and lash out against such a portrayal. Describing them as 'pre-historic', black figures, and black shadows shows the extent to which they had been demoralized. Chinua Achebe had been highly critical of such a portrayal. Mark Schorer in his essay mentions that language should be put to express the quality of experience in question. Joseph Conrad has aptly used and modified words to express the quality of experience as Schorer points out in his essay. The entire novel is replete with many such instances which go on to prove it.

"And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speak on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion. (Pg 60)

Just like a painter, Conrad has painted the African continent and especially the region around the Congo basin. He has used, as one can undeniably say, bleak, sombre and dark colours to accomplish this task. Marlow describes "the silent wilderness" where "the smell of the mud, primeval mud" was in his nostrils." Conrad has played with time, in the sense that he keeps on fluctuating from the present to the past. He has thrown Africa in "the pre-historic" times dominated by cannibals. To some extent, Marlow too echoes it - "The mind of man is capable of anything- because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future." (Pg 97)

Marlow's journey towards the Inner station is like "interminable miles of silence" for him. The water is "shallow" but "treacherous"- as if the "boiler was possessed by a sulky devil" confirming Marlow's beliefs that he was in a land where "spirits take vengeance". The stillness described here is not tranquil, calm or serene rather it is so bizarre that "not ever the faintest sound could be heard" which eventually made one suspect himself of being deaf. To add to this misery, there was the night which could strike one blind as well. Under such circumstances, the niggers have lost the idea of time and somehow they "kept their precarious grip on existence".

The apparently realistic use of language on closer inspection can be recognized as poetic. The simile on the very first page - "The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway"; personification of nature-"The current ran smooth and swift but a dumb immobility sat on the banks" and the oxymoron's "empty

stream", "great silence", "joyless sunshine"-all served to convey the extremities of an African experience that tests not only the senses but the language used to describe sensory experience. Despite the great distances and the absence of people, the landscape seems close and crowded - words like 'warm', 'thick', 'heavy'; 'sluggish' reveal that. He also uses contrasts- river with desert, past with present, dream with reality, stillness with unrest. Speaking about the beauty of craftsmanship for an author Mark Schorer says,

“We may, without risk of loss, narrow them even more, and speak of technique and subject matter. Modern criticism has shown us that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but that of experience; and that is only when we speak of the *achieved* content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content or art, is technique.”

(Schorer, 387)

Conrad has made a striking use of imagery. The novel is replete with visual, aural, tactile and olfactory images. Words thus used help us to envisage the picture in our mind and in fraction of a second we get transported to that world where "the woods looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence". The manner in which the state of poverty is portrayed is effective. Words are so much punched with meaning that we get drenched in that particular experience which the author expresses.

"No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. Don't you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity?... It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour and the perdition of one's soul - than this kind of prolonged hunger". (Pg 113-114)

Africa is not depicted as a political or a socio-economic entity but as an experience where one finds himself "buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets". It is the heart of darkness as told by Marlow, "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness". The sounds in the air sang the name 'ivory' which was plundered by the Europeans.

One of Conrad's technique is revealed when he names the character as Kurtz, which in German means short and Marlow describes Kurtz as being seven foot tall. This contrast in the meaning of his name is astonishing indeed. Kurtz shortness then does not lie in his height but in his pseudo-developmental plans which he professes to have for the blacks. He mentions a line at the end of the letter "Exterminate all the brutes". The degree of darkness varies in the novel. It begins and ends with darkness. The climax of this darkness is reached at when Marlow, in Kurtz saw,

"The inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself.....Droll thing life is - that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a fertile purpose."(Pg 185)

Conrad expounds the meaning of the phrase 'heart of darkness' in two different connotations:

(i) As far as the physical aspect is concerned, it takes us into the "pitch dark" Africa. As Marlow describes, "man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude"... "of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong - too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness."

(ii) The second interpretation of the phrase 'heart of darkness' is metaphorical in the sense that we are face-to-face Kurtz's heart. Marlow expected Kurtz to be an idealist but he too was dominated by the selfish, colonialist attitude - "This lot of ivory now is really mine". Marlow saw on Kurtz's ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror-of an intense and hopeless despair."

Society and individual are integral. The identity crisis faced by the characters can only be analyzed against the backdrop of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism which was so rampant in those days. Raymond Williams in his essay "*Realism and the contemporary novel*", states,

"In the highest realism, society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons through relationships, in fundamentally social terms." (Williams, 1988, 590)

The entire narration by Marlow remains in inverted commas but they don't close. Marlow is a subjective narrator. When one goes through the novel, one can witness a terrible suggestiveness of words and phrases. We can say for sure that the techniques employed are exclusively Conradian.

## Works Cited:

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