

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

SHARMISTHA BASU
Assistant Professor in English
Narula Institute of Technology,
West Bengal (INDIA)

ABSTRACT

Joseph Conrad used varied techniques in the narration of his celebrated work Heart of Darkness. Conrad does not involve the narrator directly in the course of events, and keeps him apart so as to critically observe all the characters and deliver it to the readers. The two narrators were designed artfully and they were successful in describing the chain of events one after the other. The first narrator opens the story and hands over to the second narrator and at last again comes back in the narrative.

Complexity in Narration

Marlow is the principal narrator in Heart of Darkness. He is introduced in the beginning of the novel by an anonymous narrator who talks about his past life and career. Marlow is used as a device, a figure created by Conrad to carry on the narration, to report on events and to examine and observe individuals and events partially. Marlow, the narrator is highly symbolical. He represents the spirit of adventure and the love of exploration.

Conrad's interest in the first person narration is quite clearly understood. He regards all human experiences as the trials and tribulations of human life. Marlow is an imaginary narrator invented by Conrad in the Heart of Darkness. He is a retired sailor who resembles Conrad himself but at the same time he differs a lot. Marlow speaks and narrates the whole story which constitutes the texture of the novel. The first narrator then becomes the listener to Marlow's story but he speaks again at intervals when Marlow stops for breath or for reconciling upon whatever he has said. Thus the narration in the novel seems a complex affair because it begins with a narrator who introduces Marlow and then Marlow becomes the chief narrator.

Conrad has invented an imaginary character Marlow who narrates the story and thus the novelist has kept himself away from the novel. Furthermore the story changes from physical exploration to the mental exploration. The exploration of Congo becomes the survey of the

dark continent of human mind. The novel depicts a systematic statement of the destruction of the visible surface of life by the darkness, but it does so in order to provide a context for the formation of a new aesthetics, and it is here that Conrad makes his choice between Marlow and the anonymous narrator, between the dream and the darkness.

Although this novel is the story of Marlow's mission up the Congo River to Stanley Falls, his interest is centered in Kurtz. The following lines illustrated the regret of the reporting narrator: 'I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally', he began, showing in his remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear; "Yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap".

In the first part of the novel, various themes are introduced. Here Marlow describes the miserable, poor and wretched conditions of the underdeveloped nations. The sight of suffering, pain and gloom makes him think that he has entered an inferno. Through his narration Marlow has given several examples of white men's useless exertions like aimless firing by a warship, blasting of a rock that is not required in the process of making railway track etc.. The emptiness and hollowness of white people is portrayed by Marlow in the character of Manager, Brick maker and the agents who waste their time in nonsense talks. Marlow calls them 'faithless pilgrim'.

In part-II we get a clear picture of Mr. Kurtz. We are informed that Mr. Kurtz has identified himself with the savages and he takes active participation in their mid night dances which always end with 'unspeakable rites.' However Marlow's admiration for Kurtz is clearly understood; although he has not met him but Kurtz has influenced him a lot.

In part III, Marlow's own evil instinct arises from sleep and he feels a great sympathy for Kurtz. He expresses that he too would have become evil if he stayed there for such a long time. At this point of the novel Marlow has probed deeply into his subconscious mind and felt the kinship that is established between him and Mr. Kurtz. The last word "The horror! Horror" uttered by Kurtz shows that he was horrified at the realization of the evil within himself.

Joseph Conrad uses the technique of "frame" story, which means that a story is told within another story. Rather than simply having Marlow as the narrator from the beginning, the reader has the opportunity to get acquainted with each of the characters, their strengths, weaknesses and personalities. It is a unique way of setting up a story as it helps to improve the reader's perception and give them a better understanding of the story.

Conrad's Relation to Africa In Section 3.2, Unit-III, of The Book.

Heart of Darkness is the record of Conrad's own experiences that he enjoyed while visiting Congo in 1890. During this journey he succeeded to fulfill that desire he expressed in his childhood by putting his finger on a map of Central Africa and said that one day he would go there. As a child Conrad noted the black spot in the centre of a map of Africa, with a snake like river forming the entrance to this heart of darkness. Conrad reflected himself in the character of Charles Marlow who was narrating the story of his journey to the dark continent of Africa.

Conrad was a born seaman and had intense yearning for exploration. Marlow's experiences of maddening horrors and sensations were of Conrad's himself. During his journey Conrad was dismayed by the brutalities of the whites and the unbearable suffering, misery and horror were transmitted in the Heart of Darkness, the most outspoken component of white imperialism and Colonial exploration. Conrad's sympathy for the natives is expressed in the line: "They were not enemies, they were not criminals, and they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom".

The colonial exploitation of dark Africa by the white men in order to accumulate ivory which was told by Marlow was what actually Conrad himself witnessed. In the novel the author has created the background where ivory was playing the pivotal role. The ivory image hangs around the Manager of the Central station, the brick-maker and all the agents. The central character Mr. Kurtz, too was deeply obsessed with ivory. In his aim he expressed his prime objective to export the natives to accumulate ivory. The Russian conveyed to Marlow that on one occasion Mr. Kurtz had threatened to kill him if he did not handover a small amount of ivory to him. In fact, the Russian had received this ivory as a gift from the native tribal chief.

Therefore from the above it is obvious that ivory was an article which symbolized white man's greed and their business mindedness. The agents were given promotions because of their achievement in the collection of ivory.

The novelist described that the natives were mostly naked and were moving like ants. Further he explained that half a dozen men were chained to one another. Each was wearing an iron collar on his neck. They were punished because they disobeyed the laws. The white men were quite indifferent to the criminals and tortured them mercilessly. It has been mentioned further that black figures crouching under the trees. They were leaning against the trunks of the trees and were clinging to the earth. These men were rotting slowly and gradually and were about to die any moment. These criminals are symbols indicating the white-men. They were black figures representing anarchy. They also symbolized disease and starvation in the Congo.

The white men were selfish and hypocrite. In the novel, Heart of Darkness, the central character Marlow observed that a rock was being blasted by the gun powder. Actually blasting was not necessary as this rock was not causing any hindrance in the way of railway tracks. When Marlow was about to reach Congo he observed a warship anchoring aimlessly. Here Conrad is using the irony to reflect the waste of time.

Conrad seems to have gifted his spokesperson Marlow with an exceptional power of observation. The natural scenery, the climate, the complexion and traits of natives are described vividly. His description of natural scenery is elaborate and striking in the novel. When he sails up the River Congo he says that going up the river is like travelling back to the primitive beginnings of the world where there was much vegetation on the earth and trees were kings. He records skilfully the details of impenetrable forest, the warm air, the silvery sandbanks with hippos and alligators taking sunbath by the side etc...

Conclusion

Coming to the conclusion it can be said that Conrad has expressed the theme of imperialism and evil in his novel Heart of Darkness. The novel projects the image of Africa as “the other world”, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s gloated intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by jubilant barbarity. Conrad has used ‘retrospective method’ to convey his experience in the course of the narrative, Marlow moves back and forth to introduce past in order to understand the present and has established a relationship between past and present.

WORKS CITED

- Cox, C. B. 1974 “Introduction,” in Joseph Conrad, Youth, Heart of Darkness and The End of the Tether .London: Everyman,.
- Khayyoom, S. A. Chinua Achebe,1999: A Study of His Novels. New Delhi: Prestige Books
- Said, Edward. 1994, Culture and Imperialism. London: Vintage
- Akhilesh Kumar.2013, Travel Writing And Empire:A study of Conrad’s Heart Of Darkness
- www.bachelorandmaster.com/.../narrative-technique-in-heart-of-darknes.
- www.papermasters.com