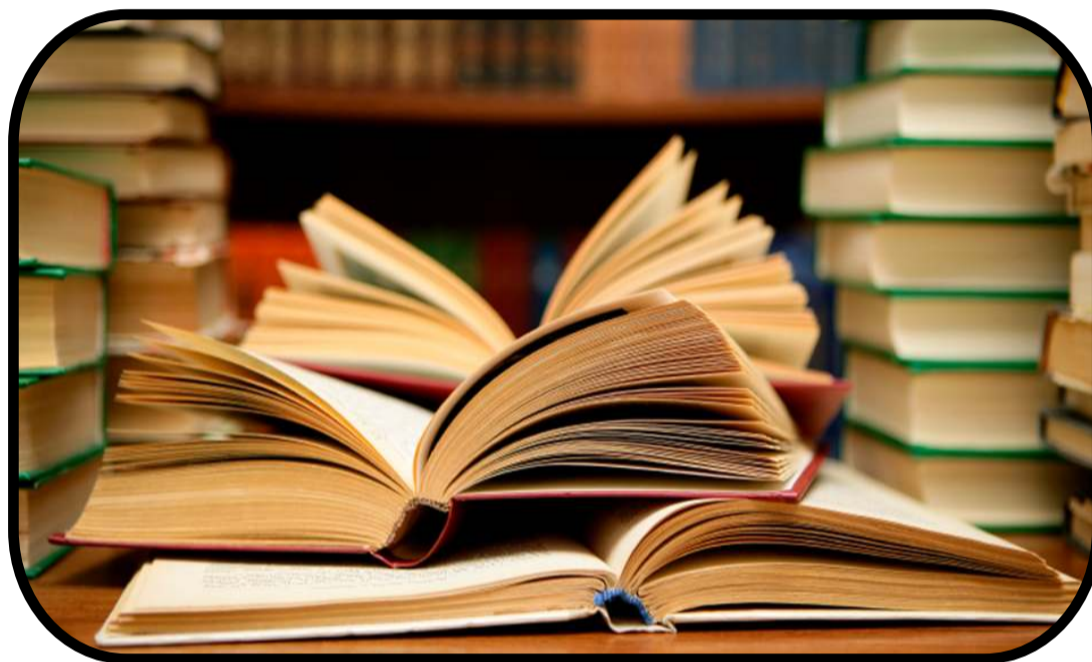


AVOIDING THE VOID: POLITICS OF MEMORY IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS



Pragati Dutta

Department Of English, Dibrugarh University.

Abstract:-Memory plays an interesting role in deciding the fate of narratives and significantly changes the meaning the text tries to establish. Memory in postcolonial literature also succumbs to such overwhelming power of memory in texts. Memory though may sound an innocent word but is in fact very political which has been well ascertained by the different examinations of the colonial and postcolonial texts. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a similar text but with a slight twist, it is difficult to place the text in either of the two categories- colonial or postcolonial. With the multiple levels of narration, this unique narrative strategy disguises the real intention of the text and causes it to blame Conrad a terrible racist and a sympathizer of the natives by others. But this paper intends to study the politics of memory in the text which should reveal which party Conrad sided with. Though it may not be a conclusive answer or solution to the problem but separating the narrators from the writer of the text may be able to lead us to the truth.

Keywords:postcolonial literature , Politics Of Memory , psychology of colonialism .

INTRODUCTION :-

The text with the gaps, fissures and absences in the narration tries to tell us the true way a colonial work or text works. It is in fact not a work of the psychology of colonialism but a work into the psychology of the colonial text and how these colonial texts establish what they seek to establish. The text allows the reader to come to conclusions and construct meanings by filling up the voids that the author has left for the reader. The gaps are the way to the real meaning, by creating the absences, he throws light on the blatant present. He says more when he says nothing.

Jan-Werner Muller(2002,1) asserts that memory “matters for the simple reason that memory is an anthropological given both individual and collective memory lies at the intersections of so many of our current concerns and organizes many of our projects.” Memory is used as a tool to justify one's story or history. One does not just 'remember', one remembers selectively and hereby we have the politics of memory where the act of 'remembering' no longer remains as innocent as it ought to have been. Memory in literature helps the author/narrator to build up the ambience he/she wishes and thereby influence opinion of the listeners/readers. In autobiographical text, the storyteller ,instead of telling the story in the actual chronological manner, twists the time schedule to hide information without appearing guilty. Memory enables the storyteller to maintain his image in front of the readers.

However, this politics created by memory is both conscious and unconscious at the same time. In Orientalism, Edward Said talks about the inevitability of entry of justification of one's work , especially in colonial and postcolonial writings. He says , “Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient ; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kind of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text- all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf.” Thus the escape from existing ideas is inevitable and colonial or postcolonial literary productions, this inevitability to escape from the position of the colonizer or the colonized leads to certain tricks played by memory of the reader and the author in justifying his cause. And we also cannot forget that the Oriental which Edward Said talks about is very mild to the conquest of the 'dark continent' which also an essential part of the colonial enterprise.

Pramod K Nayar interrogates memory as such, “Memory is contested,disputed and often tangential. It is rarely linear and involves circuitous routes through verifiable historical facts,myths , and legends. It draws upon not one but many sources.....” Thus, memory is a medium to express one's ideology in a strategically placed justifiable position. In colonial and postcolonial literature memory is used to claim and reclaim one's identity from the past. Memory here,is used both in collective and personal situation to lay claim to history.

Terry Eagleton in his book Marxism and Literary Criticism, talks about ideology and the relationship of literature with ideology. Literature not only reflects the ideology of its time, being a part of it, it also enable us to get a feel of the nature of ideology that is working underground and perceive its structure. Colonial and postcolonial literature is a space where two different set of ideologies are at work, countering each other. While colonial literature justifies its mission of bringing 'light' to the otherwise 'dark' parts of the world whereas postcolonial literature struggles to give voice to the otherwise silent notes in colonial literature. While colonialist discourse seeks to replace the history of the colonized places with a new history of the world, postcolonial literature uses collective and individual history to write their history, reflecting their ideology. Post colonial criticism of literature tend to find out the gaps and voices in the colonial texts which reflect the colonial discourse at work and seeks to identify how the different elements in these texts- themes, motifs, symbols, narrative techniques, provide support to its discourse.

The novel Heart of Darkness complicates this situation and refuses to be categorized as colonial or postcolonial literature. The text itself hangs in-between colonial and postcolonial literature. While the text reveals the exploitation by the colonialist enterprise in the Congo and reveals the dark motif of economic profit under the shadow of missionary zeal of civilizing and the exploitation of the natives in the hands of the company , especially by the central character in the novel. The novelist states in the text through the voice of the unnamed narrator aboard the Nellie , “Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame they had all gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire.....The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.” However the text also faces strong charges of being a hardcore colonial text. Chinua Achebe criticizes the novel for presenting the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. He states, “The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go

completely unremarked.....Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it.....the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any casual visitor even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad.”

To understand the politics of memory in the text, one needs to understand the narrative strategy of the text, after all, it is important to know whose memory the paper would discuss about. Conrad's text is an example of the framed narrative. The voice of the narrative is subdued into different levels which allows Conrad enough space to insulate himself from the narrative and being held responsible for the opinions expressed. The unnamed narrator whom we first encounter and to whose story the boarders on the Nellie listen to his story of Marlow's search for Kurtz in the trip down to Congo, constitute for the outer frame of the narrative. “While the reading of fiction assumes a willing suspension of disbelief in general, Conrad's framing also creates a mood and a setting that is conducive to receiving a tale as bizarre and troubling as Marlow's,” states Brinda Bose in her Introduction to the Heart of Darkness. Marlow is the primary narrator of the story and appears in the second level of the frame narrative. The narrative with different layers, ultimately reveals the story of Kurtz who lies in the centre of the tale. Kurtz can be understood as the representation of the colonial enterprise but in an ambivalent way. Kurtz though stands for exploitation of Africa by Europeans, he also stands for the blatant exposure of the truth of colonialism, speaking for and against the mission at the same time.

The objective of the paper is not simply to illustrate on the memory of Marlow or that of the unnamed narrator but seeks to study the absences in the tale, the gaps which the story tellers do not fill or are unable to fill and compare them to the information they provide and why do they give us only those particular details. Just like in post-structuralism, Derrida tells us of the meaning produced by the absences which overpowers the meaning produced by the presences, implying the production of meaning produced by binary relations of opposition. Similarly in Conrad, the paper seeks to analyze the silent voices which tell us more than the narrator likes to reveal. Here comes the politics of memory, the strategy undertaken by the narrators to justify their own position, their presence in the story, especially that of Marlow for he is also an active participant in the story about the 'wilderness'. Marlow's story is the story of a wanderer but at the same time being a party to the conqueror who also sympathizes with the conquered. In brief, Marlow takes a job as a riverboat captain with the Belgian Company while going through the companies works in the Congo, and prepares for a trip to meet Kurtz, a man that has aroused his interest, a man known for his efficiency in supplying ivory and his brutality at the same time. Marlow is fascinated by Kurtz and wills to bring him back from the 'wilderness'. The oneness that Marlow appears to feel with Kurtz is also noteworthy, indicating that both of them are comrades to the same mission. Marlow succeeds in bringing the sick Kurtz back from his place but Kurtz does not survive the journey and succumbs to his illness. The fascinating part is the knowledge or message that Marlow brings back from the 'wilderness' to the civilized world, the 'lie' which he tells to Kurtz's 'Intended'.

The very first words of Marlow, named narrator tells us, while he begins the tale of his trip down to Congo were, ““And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places of the earth””, the narrator provides ample support to Marlow's reputation as being knowledgeable of the experiences in the Congo, the knowledge of the onlooker as a wanderer, understanding 'meaning' in perpetual displacement, picturing him in the posture of the Buddha preaching, unquestionable knowledge though “inconclusive experiences”.

Marlow's memory of the 'dark' is always mute, it is only told of and hardly tells its own story as Marlow remarks “.....- smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid or savage and always mute with a air of whispering. Come and find out.” The wilderness always 'whispers', it never asserts or simply speaking, Marlow's memory does not let it assert. As he reaches the Company's Station, he comes across the six dying black men, men who have been worked to death by the Company's agents. Marlow describes them in details but as soon as he comes across the white man who is commanding the black chain gang, his description moves over to another phase. He does not elaborate on the exchanges between him and the white man though he confesses that both of them were a part of 'the great cause of these high and just proceedings.' It appears as though he wants to avoid the naked exploitation in front of him and does away with what proceeds between the two. He says, “Instead of going up, I turned and descended to the left. My idea was to let that chain gang get out of sight before I climbed the hill.” He has reduced the population to a black mass, with no face and hence no expression rather than those he bestows on them. They were 'moribund shapes', 'black shapes' or simply 'creatures'. Most of the experiences are marked with an escapist attitude and similar to the first encounter where he avoided the chain-gang, in the second encounter with the natives too he 'made haste towards the station.' Marlow also refuses to tell us about what happened in those several months when he was repairing the vessel which was supposed to take him to the Inner Station apart

from the 'accidental' burning when the storehouse caught fire. He simply assures us that nothing of significance has occurred, "Oh, these months! Well, never mind." Marlow appears to hide his own actions during his stay at the company station. It is evident from his withholding of information from the listeners/readers. There are other similar gaps in the narrative which the narrator evades. He begins the second chapter with "One evening," not indicating how much time has passed after the last time he described the Eldorado Exploring Expedition. His description appears as though he and his party are the only men present in the land except of course for "a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clappings, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying of eyes rolling," it becomes difficult to accept when Marlow could observe so much in details, why does not he mention the facial expression to the people he sees there. It may be understood that he does not understand their language but nowhere has he allotted any speech to the natives except in a few moments. He does not attribute them speech but 'yells' and 'murmurs'. The cannibals speak only to reveal their cannibalism, when the headman in the steamer wanted the body of their dead fellow to eat. Even while Marlow gives us accounts of Kurtz and his exploitation, he does not give any direct reference to his dirty work, maintaining solidarity with the white man. Though the other characters in the story are in awe of Kurtz and are in fact afraid of him, definitely owing to his devilish reputation, Marlow with his narration, hides all the dirty details of the trade and protects Kurtz as if he is protecting his own conscience and gives us justification for each of exploitative and cruel measure. Even when he tells us of the heads stuck up on poles around the house of Kurtz, he does not tell us definitely what might have led Kurtz to adhere to such cruelty or display of power. It seems Marlow was only secretly admiring the power of the white man in instilling such fear among the native blacks. Marlow remains a messenger to the white man's enterprise in Africa, a fact indirectly established by the lie which he goes back and tells the world, the story to the Intended. It is a direct allegory on the 'lies' told by the white man to the world and to himself as well.

In fact, we also realize that the narrator, both Marlow and the unnamed one on the *Nellie* may be racist, agents of the project of colonialism though pretending to suffer from guilt and a disturbing conscience, trying hard to prove their humane side but the writer definitely cannot be accused of ultimate racism. The author by withholding information from the reader, providing gaps in the story, tells us the real tale of colonialism. By creating the absences, he creates the real meaning, the true self of the colonial nature.

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