



THE JOURNEY MOTIF IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

HARMEET KAUR JHAJJ

Assistant Professor of English, SCD Government College, Ludhiana



HARMEET KAUR JHAJJ

ABSTRACT

The advent of industrialisation and accompanying advancement completely changed the face of civilization. Gone were the days of sweet languor in the countryside, instead an almost maniacal race began propelled by greed and competition. The most adverse effect of this was on the human psyche. Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* explores the devastating effect of the loss of all ethical values when one surrenders to evil and moral corruption. As a novelist of extreme situations, he pits man against himself or the environment, whether sea or exotic place, thereby isolating the character from society and the larger world of men and forces him to suffer an ordeal. He describes with his ceaseless watchfulness the behaviour of the individual in the face of the ordeal. Conrad applies the technique of the journey motif to the age-old quest-of-the-self theme to uncover the turmoil faced by a man who abandons all moral honesty and that faced by another who exhibits restraint at the crucial moment of glancing over the precipice. Herein, Conrad implies, lies the crux of having a responsible heart.

Keywords: *Motif, Journey within, Self, Evil, Greed, Apathy, Oppression*

Introduction

In his preface to 'The Nigger of Narcissus' Joseph Conrad wrote "...by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel...to make you see." Through the written word we journey metaphorically through the domains of sound, emotion and finally perception and understanding. Every genre of literature aims to achieve this objective. A number of techniques of delineation have been used by literary artists down the ages. But it was not till the modern age with its veering of interests in diverse areas like urbanisation, changing social relations, scientific investigations, the rapidly developing study of psychology, the falling apart of the existing value system and the accompanying sense of aimlessness and frustration that the novelists of the age depicted the complexities of life through a plethora of equally complex and diverse literary techniques. Accordingly, the modernist novelists, instead of crowding their novels with

characters and incidents, as the earlier novelists were wont to do, restricted themselves to one or two significant characters and analysed the way in which their minds functioned. Typical modernist novelists preferred to present their themes in indirect, oblique manner. Their narrative technique is varied and makes ample use of symbols, metaphors, motifs and so on.

One such novelist is Teodor Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski about whom it is said that his work is largely a reflection of his own personality which is characterised by loneliness developed due to his loss of family ties very early in life. The two phases of his life are his life at sea and his life as an author. As a result, water, either as sea or as river, is present in most of his tales as an entity in itself. It also implies a journey on the water body. His *Heart of Darkness* is a record of his journey to the Belgian Congo which had turned out to be one of his most intense and

psychologically disturbing experiences. His loneliness is often expressed as a long voyage on a ship.

Heart of Darkness published in 1902 is midway between a novel and a short story hence it is called a 'novella' in which he treats the theme of corruption of idealism under the strain of actual experience. Next to Hardy, he is the most pessimistic English novelist because almost all his works lay stress on human suffering, weaknesses of nature and fundamental selfishness of man.

The Journey Pattern: Discussion

To present this theme, apart from other literary devices, the novella uses a number of motifs. A motif is a pattern, a type of incident which recurs frequently in a composition. Among the motifs present throughout the novella, upriver or downriver, toward, and away from Kurtz, away from and back toward civilization, that is, the quest or the journey structure is a dominant one.

In *Heart of Darkness* the journey pattern is the most important structural feature of the novel. In fact, it is not a single journey, rather six journeys. Hence, the pattern assumes the identity of a motif by repeating itself. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow, the narrator, undertakes a series of journeys in Africa in order to reach Kurtz and bring him back from the Inner Station. These journeys of Marlow are symbolic in tone as they provide him a deep insight into the human soul. The physical journey is symbolic of the psychological journey, the journey within.

In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad achieves an artistic feat when the journey in space is combined with a journey in time and imagination. The story is told through two narrators- Marlow and an anonymous member of his band of listeners on board the steamer 'Nellie'. Both relate in the first person. Of the two narrators, Marlow's journey is in space while the journey of the anonymous narrator is in time and imagination. While waiting on the deck of the 'Nellie' for favourable tide to come in, Marlow tells his fellow voyagers, not us, the story of his trip from Europe to the African Congo. The anonymous narrator tells us the story that Marlow tells them. The narrative of Marlow is thus located in the narrative of another, just like a play-within-a-play. The journey pattern is made up of the interrelation between these two narratives. Marlow's journey was in space to space till he arrived at one place while the other narrator

travels in time and imagination in order to perceive what Marlow experienced.

Marlow's narrative begins with

"And this also" said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."
(Conrad, p 5)

Telling tales is an important part of journeys and here we are reminded of Chaucer's 'The Canterbury Tales' in which the pilgrims are to narrate tales to relieve the tedium of the journey. So also, with *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow begins the tale, it is a typical opening... "Now when I was a little chap..." (Conrad, p 7) Marlow's spatial journey begins after he has been recruited by the Belgian Trading Company to take charge of a steamer... "I left in the French steamer..." (Conrad, p 12) for Africa and thus began the first of the six journeys. Upon his arrival, he could see 'black fellows', the primitives of Africa floating in their canoes, 'the white of their eyeballs glistening'. 'They were a great comfort to look at' but the feeling would not last long. He was both fascinated and repelled by his first impression of Africa. His initial excitement at finally having his childhood dream of becoming a fresh-water sailor fulfilled, begins to fade when he witnessed mindless activities like the shelling of the continent by the 'man-of-war'. Marlow had felt even before he had set out, a sense of foreboding when he says that... "instead of going to the centre of a continent, I was about to set off for the centre of the earth." (Conrad, p 12)

The journey motif repeats itself when he has to undertake a smaller journey on a Swedish steamer travelling up the Congo. Extreme irrational behaviour of an individual 'who hanged himself' is reported to Marlow by the Swedish captain who attributes the reason to be 'the country perhaps'. This is the second time when he is told about Europeans breaking down, mentally or physically in the environment of Africa. The first was by the doctor in Europe who wanted to take the measurements of his head to record the changes that came if he returned safely.

From this point onwards, Marlow has to make a journey on foot in order to reach the outer station of the company. This is the third journey of the sequence. The appalling scenes which he witnesses along the way "...acquaint him with the ruthless exploitation of the native population... and

the utter meanness of its agents.” (Stewart, J.I.M., p 79)

Mindless detonation was taking place where none was necessary, black men were advancing in a file...

each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain... swung between them...” (Conrad, p 15)

The collective expression on the faces of these men was that of ‘death-like indifference’. The cruelty of the European masters did not end there. It was coupled with the highest degree of callousness and heartlessness. This Marlow discovered when he stumbled into the ‘grove of death’...

I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some inferno... where Black shapes crouched... in all altitudes of pain, abandonment and despair. (Conrad, p 16)

This was the place where after having exhausted their utility they had ‘withdrawn to die’. Marlow stood ‘horror-struck’. Amid such deprivation, the sight of the Company’s Chief Accountant with his ‘unexpected elegance of get-up’ appeared as a miracle, remarked Marlow ironically. His ‘starched collars’, ‘his vast cuffs’, his ‘brushed hair’, his fetish for making ‘correct entries of perfectly correct transactions’ were nothing but hypocritical since the ‘grove of death’ was only fifty feet away. In the great demoralisation of the land, it was only him who was keeping up appearances. It was from him that Marlow got his first information about Kurtz whom he is to fetch and bring back from the Inner Station. He is told that Kurtz is a

‘first-class agent’, ‘a very remarkable person’ who sends in as much ivory as all the others put together...” (Conrad, p 18)

On the fourth journey on foot from the Outer to the Central Station with a caravan of sixty black men toiling under a heavy weight of 60 lb, Marlow encounters further horrors. He sees ‘abandoned villages’, a negro carrier ‘dead in harness’, he hears about ‘a middle-aged negro with a bullet-hole in the forehead’. He realises that they either die of exhaustion or are killed at the drop of a hat. It is through this recurrent journey pattern that Marlow progressively gains an insight into the evil lurking in the minds of the European oppressors of Africa.

The young man who saw a map of Africa in a London shop front and decided to follow his childhood dream...motivated by...an impatient desire for adventure...soon... realises that the company is ‘run for a profit’...without the slightest decency, for profit without limit; and the men who run it emerge not as simple businessmen but as predatory adventurers, as ‘sordid buccaneers’. (Graver, p 83)

Upon arriving at the Central Station, Marlow receives the shocking news that the steamer of which he was to be the skipper has drowned. The work of salvation and repair is delayed for several months due to communicative and technical snags. During this prolonged stay when he waited and worked, Marlow had the opportunity to discover still more abominable people like the Manager and the Brick Maker of the Central Station. Right from the beginning, the Manager seemed to inspire the feeling of ‘uneasiness’, whose ‘glance fell on one as trenchant and heavy as an axe’. (Conrad, p21) Mr. Kurtz was seriously ill and there were instances of other people who had died or had killed themselves because they were suffering either physically or mentally. In the case of the Manager, he had a long and successful stay in Africa because he had a strong physical constitution. He remarks, too, that... “Men who come out here should have no entrails.”

Marlow learns further about Kurtz. The manager expresses concern about the ill-health of Kurtz but at the same time, his anxiety betrays his sense of insecurity caused by Kurtz’s success. Marlow meets the Brick Maker who gives him a completely different picture of Kurtz and piques his curiosity about him. ‘The chief of the Inner Station’, Kurtz is called ‘a prodigy’, ‘an emissary of pity, and science and progress’, has a very bright future according to the Brick Maker. Hence, he is overly concerned about a good recommendation being made to Kurtz.

In the face of the greedy ambitions of all these men of the company, Marlow comprehended the mystery of the forest which ‘stood up spectrally in the moonlight’ (Conrad, p25). He brooded over the doomed purpose of these apparently blind, thoughtless, and greedy men who laboured under the misconception that they could overpower and manipulate this mysterious entity.

Marlow was gradually moving towards increasing knowledge about things and meditates '...we live, as we dream - alone'. (Conrad, p 27)

'He discovers that their hollowness is caused by greed. 'It is only when he begins to sail up the river', which forms the fifth journey of the motif,

that Marlow realises that the jungle is a force of darkly ambiguous appeal and that the true European enterprise, supported by fools and fortune hunters, is a criminal fiasco of the most scandalous kind. (Graver, p 83)

This journey was the culminating point of his experience. He went up

a river where the inner truth is hidden, toward his nemesis at the inner station, where his innate strength will be finally tested." (Graver, p 79).

He records that

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once- somewhere-far away- in another existence perhaps. (Conrad, p 33)

He goes on to say that they

penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. (Conrad, p 35)

He hears the natives howling and yelling and is candid enough to admit that...

if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it, which you ...could comprehend. (Conrad, p 36).

He admits the call of the wild but is saved from succumbing to it due to the pressing demands of the work at hand. Marlow's commitment to his work is circumstantial while the 'restraint', the sense of discipline observed by the cannibal crew of *Roi des Belges* comes as an eye-opener to Marlow. All around him he sees shallow white men displaying varying degrees of hollowness 'the papier-mache Mephistopheles who has nothing substantial inside except a little loose dirt'; the hypocritical manager pre-occupied with keeping up insensitive appearances while emaciated negroes were languishing in the 'grove of death' nearby. The final

shock comes with the knowledge of Kurtz's activities due to sheer lack of restraint. At the same time, he met the Russian who was Kurtz's biggest admirer. For him Kurtz was the man who 'filled his life, ...occupied his thoughts, swayed his emotions'. From him he learns of Kurtz's tremendous influence upon the tribal chiefs who would crawl before him. It was during this journey that Marlow comes to know that 'Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts'. All these disclosures follow closely upon the first sighting of human heads upon posts near the Inner Station of Kurtz.

All these force Marlow to meditate upon Kurtz's deficiency and whether he was aware of it. Marlow thought that

the knowledge came to him at last-only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early and taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion...it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with the great solitude and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core..." (Conrad, p 58)

Marlow had come to take Kurtz back because he had been ill for the past several months, yet he did not want to be taken back. The Russian disclosed that it was Kurtz who had ordered the attack by the savages to be made on the steamer of Marlow to drive him away. But take him back he must, and this commences the sixth journey of the motif. This was the most intense, the most soul-searching and yet the most inconclusive. On the journey out of Congo with Kurtz as the precious Cargo, thin and emaciated due to his prolonged and unrestrained indulgence in 'unspeakable rites', Marlow is woken up in the middle of his self-appointed vigil over Kurtz aboard the steamer by the 'monotonous beating of a big drum...A steady droning sound of many men chanting... some weird incantation..." and discovers Kurtz to have disappeared from the cabin. This was a moral shock to Marlow. He did not raise the alarm instead he went in search of Kurtz and found him crawling on all fours in the direction of the primitive sounds. The call of the wild was so strong that he could not resist the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts and the

memory of gratified monstrous passions. Marlow tried to break this spell without betraying Kurtz. Earlier he had defended Kurtz before the Manager, even now he consciously chose to

be loyal to the nightmare of my (his) choice'. "It is suggested that Kurtz found himself in a world which – in comparison to civilization, with its externally imposed restraints of law, social morality and public opinion - was a world of enticing and dangerous possibilities, where a man must depend upon his 'own innate strength'. (Guetti, p 67)

It is for this reason that Marlow defends and sides with Kurtz. According to him Kurtz became mad, because insanity occurs when one is removed from one's social context and allowed to be the sole arbiter of one's own actions. Kurtz, too, did not have any authority but himself to answer to. Even in siding with Kurtz, Marlow had only chosen the lesser of the two evils, the second being the company which tried to maintain a hypocritical façade about its activities while Kurtz did not hide his violence, diabolic malevolence, and degeneration.

Marlow succeeds in bringing him back, but he knew that

There was nothing above or below him... He had kicked himself loose of the earth...he had kicked the very earth to pieces. (Conrad, p 66)

He has (had) detached himself from the moral world, but in doing so he has (had) ...destroyed the world. (Guetti, p 67)

Marlow remarks that although his intelligence was perfectly clear, yet his soul had gone mad. By being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself. Looking at him lying on his death bed was like looking at a man 'lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines'. In a personal moment of intense and hopeless despair Kurtz utters the words-

The horror! The horror! (Conrad, p 69)

Marlow interprets them to mean the final pronouncement of the man upon the adventures of his soul. He interprets it to be a victory- a moral victory over 'innumerable defeats, abominable terrors and satisfactions.' At least he died knowing what he had been about. He concluded that while he

had only 'peeped over the edge', Kurtz had plunged into the point of no return.

Marlow's journey up the river is difficult because he is travelling upstream, that is, against the current of the river. This journey reflects his struggles to understand the situation in which he had found himself yet

Marlow reiterates often enough that he is recounting a spiritual voyage of self-discovery. He remarks casually but crucially that he did not know himself before setting out, and that he likes work for the chance it provides 'to find yourself...what no other man can even know. (Guerard, p 53)

Marlow returns to Europe a changed and a more knowing man. Ordinary people are now "intruders" whose presence is 'irritating' because they could not possibly know the things that he knew. He feels disgusted with Africa's primitiveness yet could not find civilization fulfilling either. He recovers physically but is spiritually killed and becomes 'the isolated modern man.' (Guetti, p 77).

Heart of Darkness is apparently an account of one man's moral and psychological degeneration and of another's spatial and intellectual journey to understand the essentials of the matter- a journey into the unconscious yet at the end of the journey, at the end of the search "we encounter a darkness, and it is no more defined than at the beginning of the journey..." (Guetti, p 77)

The novel concludes with the mention of the same waterway leading 'into the heart of an immense darkness' the darkness, we all know that flows through us and we are left with the journey motif uppermost in our minds.

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