

## **TRAVEL WRITING AND EMPIRE: A STUDY OF CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS***

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All traditions in some sense recognize and celebrate travelling. Travel seems inevitable. At every step, one travels. Birth is travel, life is travel and death is travel. Life is impossible without travelling. In the absence of travel, life becomes static and passive, stagnant. In postmodern times of confusion and chaos when there is no peace, no satisfaction, no meaning travel becomes all the more necessary. Today human beings are converted into mobiles. And they always find themselves moving for one reason or another. Perhaps it is not exaggeration to say that today travel is proper method of escaping. One keeps on traveling in the hope of betterment. Thanks to the advancement of automobile industries, science and technology otherwise it would be a hard task to travel in such times when travel has become a need. With in few hours one can make a journey across the globe. Today one travels neither for adventure, nor for pleasure but travels for the sake of existence. One can assert, "I travel, therefore I am." In the present paper an attempt has been made to define travel writing, what it includes and what it excludes and the status of travel writing. What is the role of travel writing in empire building is also explored in this paper. This paper tries to examine Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in a different way. Plus the paper is a humble attempt to read and interpret this classic text as a travelogue as generally it is considered novel or novella or fiction.

Writing about travel may be considered travel writing. But it is not so simple to define travel writing as appears from this simplistic definition of travel writing. First of all the adjective 'travel' placed before writing creates difficulty. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines travel as, "An act or activity of going from one place to another" (Wehmeier1384). Stating differently to travel is to make a journey. This movement through space might be an epic and long journey taking a person from one nation to another, one continent to another continent, from one mountain to another or it might take place within the limits of traveller's immediate locality. Such definition of travel gives birth to innumerable questions. Are all forms of movement through space regarded as travel? What about a trip to the local shop or store or a quick visit to one's neighbor or movement from one room to another within one's house? If some journeys are not classified as travel what then are the criteria of labeling some journeys as travel. These questions indicate that it is not quite easy to define travel. Almost same kind of difficulty arises in giving definition(s) of travel writing. Whether it is written after actual journey or it can also be written after imaginary journey. Is it fictional or non-fictional? Are Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and other texts of same nature considered travelogues or these are different from travel writing. Should one exclude these texts from travel writing as these are fictional? Travel writing is a hybrid genre which embraces everything and it has complex relationship with other genres. In the words of Jonathan Raban,

“Travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed...” (Raban 253-254). That is why it is very difficult to tell where it begins/ends and other genres start. Rather its boundaries are very fuzzy. It borrows freely from history, geography, social science, anthropology and talks about day to day happenings, economic, political and environmental problems. A similarity may be drawn between travel writing and translation. The creators of both arts work for target readers try to understand different cultures, undertake daunting task, suffer from the charge of infidelity and have almost same kind of (mis)fortune.

As far as *Heart of Darkness* is concerned it too might be seen as travel writing. First of all it does have travel as main theme which is the chief characteristic of travel writing. Then Conrad himself was a traveller and before establishing himself as a novelist he was a sailor and he made several voyages to far Eastern waters, notably Singapore, Borneo, and the Gulf of Siam, all of which served as materials for his novels. One trip up the Congo led to the writing of one of his best shorter works, *Heart of Darkness*. Every one knows that in travel writing first person narrative technique is generally used as it makes a travelogue more authentic and gives it realistic touch. Conrad was strongly in favor of the method of first person narration. In *Heart of Darkness* he invented a (fictional) narrator who is a retired English sailor named Marlow and who resembled Conrad himself in the quality of much of his experience and in the temperament on which that experience worked. In the introduction to *Youth* in which Marlow appears for the first time as chief narrator, Conrad says, “He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony.”<sup>31</sup> This might lead us to think that Marlow is Conrad’s alter ego and a mere a mouth piece for him. So Marlow is no one else but Conrad himself. Through Marlow Conrad is revealing his own experiences and observation which he acquires while traveling in Africa. Then one fails to understand why *Heart of Darkness* is called fiction. As it also deals with facts. If one removes front and back pages of *An Area of Darkness*; a non-fictional travel text, and *Heart of Darkness*, a fictional text, then one will find almost same kind of artistic pieces. Why do we categorize literature into different genres when every genre deals with same feelings, emotions, experiences and observations? Why do we call some text fiction and some text non-fiction, when fiction has factual elements and non-fiction has fictional elements? Otherwise also same kinds of feelings are evoked by both *Heart of Darkness* and *An Area of Darkness*. Finally both *Heart of Darkness* and *An Area of Darkness* project socio-cultural aspects of the place visited by their authors. In the case of V. S. Naipaul it is India while Conrad talks about Africa. About travel writing Carl Thompson says, “ It is most obviously , of course, a report on the wider world, an account of an unfamiliar people or place...it also reveals something of the culture from which that writer emerged” (Thompson 10). So *Heart of Darkness* is an example of travel literature and it is fictional as well as non-fictional travelogue.

Present text works at multiple levels. A reader always remains inconclusive about it. To quote C.B. Cox, a well-known authority on Conrad, in this regard: “There is no one key which will unlock the secret meaning of *Heart of Darkness*” (Cox 13). *Heart of Darkness* has been interpreted in many different ways Anti-Imperialists emphasize the suffering and torture of the natives, and so the story is used as a tract against the colonial powers. To quote Ian Watt: “Heart of Darkness even now endures as the most powerful literary indictment of imperialism” (Watt 161). From the Marxist point of view, Kurtz is seen as an embodiment of all evils. While some believe that this supra-masculinist text is about the writing of empire. The wealth of interpretation indicates the kind of travelogue with which we are dealing.

Edward Said writes about imperial attitude in his book *Culture and Imperialism*: “Dismissed or forgotten were the ravaged colonial peoples who for centuries endured summary justice, unending economic oppression, distortion of their social and intimate lives, and a recourse less submission that was the function of unchanging European superiority” (Said 20) which is beautifully captured in the complicated and rich narrative of *Heart of Darkness*. On the one hand the narrator, Marlow acknowledges the tragic predicament of all speech;” ...it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence-that which makes its truth, its meaning-its subtle and penetrating essence... We live, as we dream-alone...” (HOD 49). Still he manages to convey the enormous power of Kurtz’s African experience through his own overmastering narrative of his voyage into the African interior towards Kurtz. This narrative in turn is connected directly to Europe’s mission in the dark world.

Conrad also seems to be an advocate of colonialism. And in *Heart of Darkness* he defends imperial rule by presenting Africa in negative light. Perhaps which prompts Chinua Achebe to quip: “It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination...” (Achebe 163). In the very beginning of the narrative Conrad tells through unnamed narrator the tragic predicament of a seaman: “In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance...” (HOD25). Yet Marlow, who is otherwise an outsider, finds himself competent enough to interpret African people, their culture. Throughout the narrative Africa is stamped with otherness. And he has portrayed Africa as a fantasy world inhabited by witch-doctors, mysterious beings and as a ‘dark’ country. This politics reminds us of, to use Edward Said’s term, orientalism which is a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient. His conception of the colonialist intention corresponds to that expressed by Rudyard Kipling in a poem called “The white Man’s Burden.”

Being an outsider, this Westerner could not do justice to African cultural heritage. Throughout his account Marlow both denigrates and downplays Africa. Otherwise also, it is very difficult to interpret culture of ‘Others’ because they are alien. In *Heart of Darkness* we see Africa from European glasses. Africans are considered as other. Africa is portrayed as a fantasy world inhabited by bushmen, witch-doctors, mysterious being and as a dark country. S.A. Khayyoom maintains, “Africa captivated the European imagination right from the time of Prince Henry, the navigator in the fifteenth century, and it has been found both fascinating and repellent” (Khayyoom 9). In colonial texts colonized people are stamped with otherness. In *Heart of Darkness* Africans are not merely presented as Other. Rather in this euro-centric text Africans are placed in predicate position. The tale is told by two white narrators-Marlow and the unnamed narrator. The listeners, sitting on deck are also white people. Conrad to put Edward Said in use is a “Polish expatriate” (Said 25). Though Conrad does not belong to the empire but after all he has soft corner for white people. He can never be in the side of blacks. He only pretends or tries to be a detached observer but fails to be impartial. Chinua Achebe sees the novel as a racist work and he calls Conrad a ‘bloody racist’ as Conrad merely adopts ‘the image of Africa’ which is circulated in Europe.

Perhaps Conrad is not presenting an image of Africa but rather Marlow’s experience of Africa and Marlow’s attempt to understand and represent that experience. Actually Marlow is a fictional character whose consciousness operates according to contemporary codes. If Marlow’s perceptions are at times racist, it is because those codes were racist. Also, he is a product of his creator.

Even Conrad describes the natural scenes and atmosphere of two places in two different ways. The atmosphere in Britain is pictured positively. He describes that the day was ending calmly, the sky was cloudless, the water shone beautifully. His description of the Thames river is remarkable for the bright picture. To quote from the text: “We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the august light of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, “followed the sea with reverence and affection....”(HOD 24). One can easily notice the use of phrases like ‘venerable stream’, ‘august light of abiding memories’ and the attitude towards the Thames, implied by the unnamed narrator. Further, the first narrator tells about the Thames: “It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin...” (HOD 24-25). But nowhere in the description of the African river, he talks about its history. Rather he presents that river in very negative light. Marlow tells about the African river: “It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled with its head in the sea, its body at rest a far over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And...It fascinated me as a snake would a bird...” (HOD28-29). Such representations of the ‘Other’ have been noted as common places in colonial writings. In this paragraph it is interesting to note the deliberate use of ‘dark’ for ‘a blank space of delightful mystery’. Also the river is compared to a negative creature that is ‘snake’. Thus the Thames river is shown as a river upon which people looked with reverence and affection but the Congo river is shown resembling an uncoiled snake and a snake can never be taken as a positive symbol. Thus the biased attitude towards the natural beauty or scenery of the two places makes this text a colonial text.

Marlow seems to speak in defense of 19th century European colonialism. He says Britain would not experience those feelings of disgust and hatred which the ancient Roman conquerors had experienced when they came to England. What saved the British from those feelings are their ‘heavenly mission to civilize’, blacks and their efficiency. In his own words: “What saves us is efficiency- the devotion to efficiency” (HOD 27). Further Marlow justifies European colonialism by saying: What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea-something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...” (HOD 27). This is the prime defense for European imperialism. And it is two-pronged: idea and efficiency. The colonizers apparently believed in the enlightenment theory or in ‘Whiteman’s burden’. They believe that they are actually on a mission to carry ‘light’ to dark, savage land. In the second chapter Marlow describes the landscape of Africa: “Going up that river was like traveling back, to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish, There was no joy...”(HOD 56-57).

Marlow, the representative of the West, has liked to create an exotic picture of the ‘Other’ or Africa as primeval, primitive, and also as unsophisticated and uncultured. Then we have African people also. And Marlow’s approach to the natives reflects both Conrad’s revolutionary outlook and the fact that it was partly overshadowed by the conditions and prejudices of the period in which he wrote the text. The first example of this duality occurs when Marlow comments on the Negroes he sees along the African coast: “They shouted, snarled; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks-these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement...” (HOD 35). The use of ‘grotesque

masks' which means extremely ugly face is a pejorative nowadays. But at the same time Marlow by admiring their physical strength makes their treatment ambivalent. The same can be said about the treatment of Kurtz's black mistress. As she is both 'wild' and 'gorgeous' Actually Marlow is unable to understand African. As he calls them: "mysterious niggers" (HOD 41). We as readers of the text do not know why Conrad at times admires Africans and at other time projects them in dark light. Might be he is translating what he watched, or he might be biased also. Or his position might be similar to that faced by anthropologists when they return to their country to write up their research.

One can never say with confidence whether it is a critique of imperialism or a defense of Empire because ambivalence and ambiguity, contradiction and inconsistency typify *Heart of Darkness*. Nothing in the text seems free from ambivalence. Be it the theme, or characters, or Conrad's treatment of female or title. And same can be said about the genre of the text. Actually it has mix forms and it sets an example of meta-genre, hybrid genre and it does not belong to any one genre but it is genre of genres. If Edward Said calls it "...both anti-imperialist and imperialist"(Said 20), one can also call it fiction and non-fiction, novel and travelogue. Let us put our thinking, reasoning and knowledge aside and begin a movement of calling every text art because when heart speaks it speaks in the same language and same manner and if there is any genre it reveals itself through same genre. Boundaries, compartments and hierarchies are created by man for his selfish motives. Perhaps it can challenge literary territories and remove boundaries. Let us hope for the growth and development of minor genres.

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