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Marlow and the Narrative Burden in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (HD)remains one of the most enigmatic novella of our times not only by the breadth of controversy it has generated among scholars, but also by its tight-knit symbolism and blurred narrative that lends itself to multidimensional and even abstract interpretations, and perhaps most famously by accusations of racism levelled against Conrad by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. Recent global[1] outcry sparked by the killing of George Floyd and the Covid-19 pandemic have generated fierce debates on racial equality and racial justice. This paper intends to read *Heart of Darkness* in the light of these debates (and the difficulty of narrating them). Though there have been attempts to obliterate the issue of race in the interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*[2], it is difficult to do so, partly because the narrative's symbolism defies that sense of finitude leaving open many avenues for both progressive and conservative readings. The burden of clarity rests on Marlow's shoulders, who must wade through ambiguity to deliver a compromised truth. In our time ,Marlow is the voice of conscience trying to navigate the various alternative truths that hold sway in HD. He can be seen as a Christ-like figure burdened with the difficulty of rendering the truth. In the era of alternative truths, the debate as to whether Marlow is complicit becomes more enigmatic and complex as he tries to navigate the coruscating mesh of a story he can hardly come to terms with. Rather than see him as condescending, Marlow is a victim of a system from which he must extricate himself

[1] George Floyd 's Murder and Meghan Markle's explosive interview on March 12th,2021 0n CBS concerning her treatment by the royal family exarcebated the already toxic racial environment.

[2] See Cedric Watts Essay "' A bloody racist':Achebe's view on Conrad".The Yearbook of English Studies.Vo.13,1983,pp.196-209 and Dorothy Trench-Bonnet's article "Naming and Silence:A Study of Language and the Other in Conrad's "'Heart of Darkness'" Conradiana,vol.32,no.2,2000,pp.84-95.JSTOR,www.jstor.org/stable/24634878.

by telling a difficult truth. Even though readings of HD have tended to attempt to evade the discussions on race, the nature of the narrative and the difficulty of closure it poses makes it impossible to do so in the light of recent world events.

Key Words: Narrative, Burden

There is no doubt that *Heart of Darkness* (HD) remains one of the most important and influential novels of the 20th century. From my first reading of the novel some twenty-five years ago, I have been intrigued by its complex narrative and abundant symbolism, more so because of the fascinating character of Marlow who carries the burden of the narrative literarily and symbolically. Marlow's burden consists in resolving the moral dilemma involved in justifying the oppression of an independent people, silent in the novel either intentionally or otherwise by the various narrators, while validating the moral outrage associated with this. The burden of *HD* is neither on the novelist, nor is it on the omniscient narrator; it rests on the shoulders of Marlow whose greatest difficulty is in translating gruesome realities to acceptable truths.

In the age of social media, Marlow's predicament can be related to Darnella Frazier's[3] who filmed George Floyd's death and permitted the world to know exactly what happened and how it happened. One would have expected unanimity in terms of praises for what she did but this wasn't the case. In a system that does not permit civilians to intervene in police actions against civilians, Frazier becomes like Marlow, the almost handicapped bystander, burdened by conscience. Like Marlow, she is the moral conscience of her generation incapacitated by the laws of the land to act against wrongdoing. However far-fetched that comparism may be, Marlow and the civilian onlookers in George Floyd's death scene carry the guilt of inaction raising the ever-haunting question of whether the witness to a crime is as guilty as the criminal. Marlow's narrative is an anguished attempt to vindicate himself from the moral outrage of inaction in the face of criminal deeds.

[3] She testified on Tuesday March 30th,2021 in Minneapolis.She was 17 at the time of the event.

Marlow's difficulty is in justifying the very essence of injustice and in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent acts of racial injustice against people of colour in many parts of the world, the nature of Marlow's narrative can be seen as symptomatic of the desire to come to terms with basic truth. Racism, injustice and their misrepresentations are all plagues that must be dealt with and Marlow like the present day activist is caught in the throes of truth and lies. His narration is a painful exercise in moral exorcism both at the personal and collective levels. Conrad resorted to symbolism as a method to recreate or reflect the enormity of the violence perpetrated in the Congo. In his study of Conrad's representation of violence in the Congo, Joyce Wexler argues that the only reasonable way Conrad would have brought forth to the reader the reality of the violence in the Congo was through the use of symbolism as he attaches "symbolic meanings to realistic accounts of historical events" (99) even though, as he indicates, this has earned the scathing criticisms of Chinua Achebe and Frederic Jameson[4].That notwithstanding, it is in symbolism Wexler argues that Conrad finds the appropriate medium in a world which has become more secular to represent the reality of violence.

The first narrator sets the stage at the beginning of the novel for Marlow's difficulty and that of the readers and even for sympathy towards Kurtz. The Thames is described as stretching like an "interminable waterway"(3),the air around Gravesend is described as "dark", and "condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth" (3).The description of the physical environment associated with decay and decadence is synchronised to the physical description of Marlow whose narrative exudes the flavour of imperial difficulties and atrocities but equally the grand project of self-justification. Marlow is seen by the first narrator as having "sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect" and most of all, resembles an "idol" (3) with the "pose of a buddha" (6). This description of Marlow augurs both prescience and wisdom.

Marlow's narrative begins on the premise that even though speaking from the vantage point of "civilisation", the duty to memory should be a humbly one owing to the knowledge that Britain has also once been a place of darkness civilised by the Romans. Marlow's efforts in the opening

[4] See Achebe,Chinua.2006. "An Image of Africa:Racism in Heart of Darkness."In Heart of Darkness.Edited by Paul Armstrong.New York:Norton and Jameson,Frederic R.1981."War and Representation."PMLA 124.5:1532-47

lines of the novel smacks of a subtle attempt to foreshadow the morbidity of those on the civilising mission and at the same time the gruesome effect on them and eventually on him.

Conrad constructs the narrative around the sharp contrast between the illusionist in Europe who are convinced that their intrusion into Africa is built on humanitarian grounds and the actual reality in the jungle. Marlow is a perfect incarnation of this reality. His quest, with the attendant reality, for a position and recommendation to go to the jungle, and the intensity of the suffering the blacks encounter as he progresses into the heart of the jungle put him at an almost omniscient position to objectively render the truth about Europe's search for material resources and the lies accompanying it. Marlow recognises the necessity for material possession and at the same time is gnawed by the moral consequences of that action. His description of natives is reminiscent of this struggle between his inner moral truth-the necessity to be as truthful as possible in describing the natives as he sees them, and at the same time degrading them to justify the loot. It is precisely the conclusion of Patrick Brantlinger's study of Africans and Victorians, that Victorians invented the myth of the dark continent, to justify the loot, to assuage the economic pressures of Europe.

There is no question in my mind that Marlow sympathises with those in Belgium who live under the illusion that the mission to the Congo is Humanitarian, and at the same time regarding them as the perverted monsters who have refused to recognize the extent of the damage their actions have caused as they turn a blind eye to the auspicious brutality of their agents. Marlow recognises his involvement and in a sarcastic ironic thrust agrees that "After all,I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings."(16).Guilt and regret result from inane participation in the "rapacious and pitiless folly"(17) of these proceedings to which Marlow must find convincing justification. Marlow describes the suffering of the natives but does nothing to alleviate it simply because as Cedric Watts has indicated he is "involved in the exploitation he detests" (Watts,qtd in Murphy 2013:8). It is this double standard that has over the years marred Conrad's image as a racist and blurred the lines between sympathy and complicity. He gives the natives scant attention except to revel in their exoticism. His stoicism against the sufferings of the natives is only compensated by a mild revulsion against Kurtz before he meets him. As he moves into the central station, Marlow is jettisoned between the grim reality of the savagery

against the natives and the astonishing resistance of the imperial looters lost in the thickness of an inscrutable jungle. He understands his job is difficult and even though stoic as he might be, he craves the listeners to try to understand his story and his line of thought.

Marlow lays bare the truth of the difficulty of his mission-to wit-the narration of his experience. Even before he narrates his encounter with Kurtz, inadvertently he reveals to us that he betrayed himself. He detests lies because of the "flavour of immortality" characteristic of them, yet even before we can understand the circumstances of his meeting Kurtz, he reveals that he lied. And Marlow does not simply lie but lies in his narration about the extent of his lie. He went beyond "near enough" (27) and lied to Kurtz's Intended and to those who knew him. He tried to humanise Kurtz by deleting the conclusion to his proposal that the solution to the problem of the native is simply to "exterminate the brutes" (). Marlow's story anticipates his self-realization. In the first part of the narrative, we can see that his thoughts are sandwiched between a great expectation of seeing Kurtz, the cruelty of the mission and the possible justification for such actions. The narrative betrays a sense of complicity as it shows the inability of the narrator to speak boldly about the truths relating to the imperial mission. He announces earlier, a lack of interest in Kurtz and at the same time a curiosity to comprehend his moral acumen. Marlow's difficulty is that of a witness to rape struggling to justify his inaction and, in some respects, his participation in it. Martine Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère discussing landscape as body concurs that Conrad's originality of using land as body trope lies in his 'revaluation of the body as the site of humanity" (189). Africa is like a woman raped by an intruder; and Marlow is the one who must shirk off this guilt and the burden of it. The progression of the narrative and Marlow's own journey into the landscape is a strained attempt to understand this rape and assuage its impact.

Conrad Juggles the narrative in a way that Marlow's truth is self-revelatory. He is burdened by both impressions and realities and his greatest agony is in reconciling both. He babbles and carries the reader into his fantasy and attempts to convince that in such circumstances as he finds himself psychological strength is a pre-requisite for survival, because "the reality-the reality, I tell you-fades. The inner truth is hidden-luckily, luckily" (36). Marlow's narrative is ridden with projections of his final objectives. He wonders why the natives have not eaten them arguing in

narrating this story that every person will breakdown in the face of hunger. He is justifying the myth of the African cannibal without overtly saying it. Marlow's civility towards the natives is simply the result of his capitalist and utilitarian upbringing. They are useful, so should not be disposed of, even though at the same time he thinks they threaten his own very existence. He mourns the death of his helmsman not for his humanity but for his service:

> Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back-a help-an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me-I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory-like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment. (51-52)

This is one of the supreme moments of truth that Marlow utters unadulteratedly and that speaks to his divided mind and conscience but perhaps more importantly as a projection to the love of his white brother-Kurtz with whom he shares a genuine and natural affinity. Marlow's relationship is transactional and the fact of his audience not protesting speaks of their own complicity and assertion of his truths. He is the lawmaker conscious of the rapacious evil of his people yet attempting to divert attention. The imagery Conrad uses above like in most of the narrative is impressive and selected on purpose to drive his narrative right into the mind of the reader. Rather than see the humanity of the helmsman, Marlow sees him from a purely utilitarian lens and therefore pretends to no amount of feelings towards him.

Marlow shares the common sense of humanity with Kurtz from whom he struggles to dissociate himself, yet at the same time makes effort to comprehend and accept him. He is wedged between seeing Kurtz as the incarnation of evil and as a symbol of bravery. The more Marlow dives into his experience at the heart of the jungle, the more he seems to shed light on the difficulty of the mission for both him and Kurtz. His likeness for him becomes therefore more profound. He graduates from distaste to admiration and at some point, to idolization. He colludes with this "choice of nightmares" (63) because it is an inevitability built on shared unconscious values to

the point of affirming to the Russian Harlequin, that Mr. Kurtz's reputation is saved with him. And events in the narration justify his claim.

Marlow's narrative is a reflection of his soul, the bitterness of truth, of the apprehension of essence and a clear realization of the difference between assumptions and facts. He recognises to his listeners that "If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man" (67). Marlow is mesmerized by Kurtz and even in telling the story, his tone betrays his sympathy for the man he said at the onset that he hated. What he says of Kurtz's soul is exactly about his struggle with himself. The weight of his association with Kurtz is compared to him carrying "a ton on my back down that hill" (68). Marlow characterises his association with Kurtz as a "choice of nightmares forced upon me" (69). His mortification is construed as essentially a forced relationship with the devil. But this is by no means so. This is himself trying to explain his inner voice and the conscience of their own tenebrous actions. The deeper Marlow goes into the jungle, the clearer he understands the perils of his own mission and the justification for the brutality there of. In narrating what seems to be his ordeal, Marlow is exorcising the burden of those like him on exploration missions for the motherland. How does one justify pure evil, and at the same time be indifferent to the struggles of those thrust into the unknown? It is a question in narrating his story that Marlow is interested in. In recalling Kurtz's words, "The Horror! The horror!" (71), Marlow in fact projects his own horror at associating with this kindred spirit and acknowledging the truth of the brutality to which he is inadvertently a part of.

Marlow's narration is his parallel story to Kurtz's. In narrating his journey to the heart of darkness and by extension to Kurtz, Marlow is narrating his own ordeal and the possibility of his own self-effacement. To have judged Kurtz as "a remarkable man" (72) even against the background of what he did, Marlow takes sides with evil. He ascertains that Kurtz cry of horror is "an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions." (72). Marlow is caught between the existential threat posed by a corrupting civilizing mission and the personal tragedies of those involved in the mission. He is overwhelmed by what he sees. In asserting that his imagination needed soothing, Marlow attests to his own difficulty in coming to terms with the near impossible mission of clearing Kurtz from guilt and by extension clearing the imperial mission of their crimes. He is a kind of a Sisyphean

figure, rolling up the stone of justice and finding out that on and on it rolls back because it is built on lies. His last encounter with anything that has to do with Kurtz was wrapped in lies. Contrary to his hatred of lies, Marlow ends up completely wrapped in it because it is only in lies that he can free himself from the psychological trauma and affirm a certain semblance of rest.

The image of Kurtz's wife, radiant and affirmative in the face of personal tragedy is Conrad's statement on the only meaningful reality in these high and 'just' proceedings. The contrast between the room in which she and Marlow are, which grows darker as the conversation unfolds and her "forehead, smooth and white,", which "remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (76) signify the level of Marlow's struggle. The quest for material possessions is contrasted with the simplicity of Kurtz's Intended who away from the realities of the jungle lives in the illusion of Kurtz's righteousness. Kurtz's life is a tragedy of unfathomable proportions. At his death, he is dispossessed of all his wealth. The reality of nothingness is in my opinion the most difficult thing, Marlow is trying to come to terms with.

The most atrocious thing in Marlow's narrative and the most outstanding is the lie he tells to Kurtz's Intended, that Kurtz's last words were her name. This lie by metaphorically is the lie told the rest of Europe about the intentions and the actions of European imperial missions to the rest of the world where European explorers went to. His Intended like Marlow's great aunt represents most of the innocent society to whom these lies are fed and who innocently belief them.

The most difficult part of the narration is at the end when the narrator has to come to grips with how to manipulate the truth and turn it into a truthful lie. The narration of his struggles to get an appointment, to travel to the central station and eventually to meet Kurtz are minute when compared to how to cope with re-shaping the false narrative about Kurtz's life. Marlow actually ends up like Kurtz from a moral perspective. He leaves England with the illusion and enthusiasm for adventure and in his trajectory discovers the cruelty of his predecessors. He projects an extremely high opinion of his own morality debasing as he moves into the interior the other 'agents of progress'. In his narrative, he indicates at numerous moments his dislike for Kurtz. The end of the narrative is a complete contrast to his original vision and thoughts. He ends up justifying the cruel actions of those who preceded him because as he concedes, he has gone close

to the precipice and now can understand the extent to which these explorers went. Marlow tries to wade off prejudice by embellishing Kurtz's story and raising him to the level of a deity. The deification of Kurtz is not simply the result of Marlow's personal experience but the product of a thorough understanding of the difficulty and near impossibility of the mission assigned to Kurtz- the ruthless extraction of ivory from the African jungle.

The whole narrative therefore revolves around the lie that Marlow must tell, but most importantly about the lie of the imperial mission and the stark reality of it. The fact of Marlow embellishing it calls into question even the truth of his own narrative and his own experience. Conrad chooses to have someone tell the story of this semi -autobiography of his trip to Africa inorder to give it a semblance of truth. This certainly has some merit but at the same time smacks of untruth. The sense of guilt is written everywhere in the latter part of the narrative and no one more than Marlow is aware of this. He has no difficulty telling this story even though, he strains to cope with the lie he tells the Intended and to the rest of us listening to him. His listeners interject rarely, either because the story is gripping or perhaps, they are indifferent or maybe because he is a God-like person when it comes to his seafaring experience and so he is listened to religiously. His narration ends as abruptly as it begins, and he is at the end of the story still considered as an incredibly wise person who sits in a "meditating Buddha" (79) pose. The first narrator therefore recognises some wisdom in Marlow through that image in the telling of his story and shows respect to him by so doing. Marlow commands respect, yet he tries to redeem himself by projection. The unease of the story can be seen in his telling a lie to those who really believe in him and show him some respect.

There is a pervasive truth at the heart of darkness and Kurtz is a victim of it. Marlow's story about Kurtz is his duty to memory, the memory of the history to which he has been part. He narrates the story factually and psychoanalyses the mind of the story to justify the affinity he finally develops with the author of his tale. Marlow is wary about the burden entrusted to him to tell the story of plunder in the most unobtrusive manner which is counter to his moral beliefs. But like Kurtz and all of them thrown into the lap of adventure, Marlow is the scapegoat or the honest one on whose shoulders falls the responsibility of justifying the heinous acts of cruelty in the African jungle.

The nightmare of choices to which Marlow is confronted is his biased and sometimes offhand objectification of the natives and his kindred relationship to Kurtz. Marlow's difficult job is that of telling the truth as it is, attempting at all cost to embellish European cruelty or what Andrew Gibson calls Kurtz's "totalizing rhetoric" (123).This ruthless appropriation is what Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy considers as European exceptionalism, where everything belongs to Europeans and nothing to the Africans with whom they assume (through the mouthpiece of Marlow), a common kinship. The narration is jostled between exasperation and relief. The lie to the Intended is the resolution to his anguished soul, and the narration itself is the therapy to his conscience. Marlow's story telling and the manner of doing so is his exuberant attempt to lift the burden off his shoulders, to renew himself and to come to grips with the overwhelming sadness and regrets associated with his trip to Africa. His, is the anguish of a good man hunkered to the stake of untruth and forced to make it right.

The criticism of racism[5] levelled against Conrad fades in the face of Marlow's struggles with himself. Even though some critics have considered Conrad's narrative as a way for him to escape personal responsibility for what he did, Marlow's anguish leaves no doubt that he is also a victim of a system he is forced to justify. It is the story of the good Sherriff overwhelmed by an unjust system he is obliged to protect. Kurtz is characterized as the summation of all of Europe and therefore a reflection of the common attitudes of the time vis-à-vis others. Ryan Francis Murphy has suggested that Conrad's decision not to attribute blame directly to King Leopold alone is intentional. Blaming King Leopold alone will absolve the rest of Europe from guilt. Kurtz is a voice, he is the symbol of aggravated nonchalance, of a Europe defiant of moral values and totally and blindly given to the cause of materialism yet is not unaware of the moral crisis that this engenders. Marlow and Kurtz are two sides of the same equation, each wrestling with the other. Conrad did not write HD in order to dehumanize Africans, even though there are sporadic and intentional descriptions of natives as the primitive 'other.' His greatest concern seems to be the blind looting of the continent and the adverse effects this has on the same individuals. Rino Zhuwarara captures this state of mind more succinctly when he contests the novel's pretention to

[5] Chinua Achebe's article "An Image of Africa" appeared in The Massachusetts Review.vol.18, no.4(winter 1977),pp.782-794.The paper was a lecture Achebe gave at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, February 18,1975.It remains the most virulent attack on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to date

greatness because it negotiates the "economic rape which Africa suffered and the artistic loot that Conrad gets away with!" (240). Marlow's burden and the same difficulty of negotiating truth and lies is indeed Conrad's. His affliction as a first-person witness translates into a narrative packed with symbols that leave the story open ended. This inability for closure is considered by Ian Watt as a narrative weakness, due to "the intellectual crisis of the late nineteenth century, a crisis by now most familiar to literary history in its twin manifestations of the death of God and the disappearance of the omniscient author." (181.Qtd in Wexler P.104).This doubt as Joyce Wexler contends gave room to the numerous objections to *Heart of Darkness*, the most virulent of course coming from Achebe.

The narrator begins by telling us how the story is like weaving a yarn and that the truth of a story is rather more inside the story than outside of it. The First narrator puts in perspective the complexity of Marlow's story which to him is "not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" (5). Conrad plays against accusations of subjectivity by putting in this complex matrix of emotions and thoughts. The beginning and end of the story are synchronized in their inability for closure. The lie at the end of the story leaves an open book of suggestions and motives and the opening pages of the book give the impression that the totality of the story will never be revealed because it is buried in mystery. This tale is an agonized rendition of the difficulty of speaking the truth when caught between loyalties. It is a reflection of the difficulty of language translating the inscrutable and the mysterious into concrete reality. In his discussion of the unsayable in *Heart of Darkness*, Stephen Skinner indicates the insufficiency of words to reveal truth. He contemplates the ineffable in *Heart of Darkness* from an Apophatic perspective wherein the author assumes that he will not say something only at the end to say it. He constructs it in the following terms: "…an interweaving of a narrative with its own critique, a speaker within speech casting doubt on the reliability of what is said" (99) which read into the novel indicates how it ends in a series of negations "a negation of narrative certainty, an overriding sense that what matters cannot be said" (102).

Conrad's main narrator has the double task of objectively rendering the imperial adventure to which he is a part and at the same time taking responsibility for his own part in it. In his rebuttal to Achebe's accusation of racism, Cedric Watts brilliantly articulates these contradictions arguing that "It is an organizational principle of *Heart of Darkness* that reassuring cliches are evoked and then subverted, just as salutary affirmations are sought, briefly established, and then undermined." (198). In assuming such, Watts inadvertently displays Conrad's and by implication Marlow's difficulty of shirking off the burden of guilt. Watts navigates the difficult terrain of finding an entente between Conrad's stance vis-à-vis his portrait of blacks. The difficulty of finding the appropriate grammar lands the narrator into a sophisticated array of symbolism which leaves open the possibility of a multitude of interpretations. Caught in-between divided loyalties both narrators are faced with the uneasy task of making atrocities look attractive. Marlow leaves many gaps perhaps because the details are more gruesome for the tender ears of his audience or simply because he doesn't have the courage to elucidate them. And as Fred Solinger argues in his discussions of how Marlow is speaking from a liminal position, that is, a position that enables him to be both oppositional and critical, the kaleidoscopic narrative format Conrad employs speaks to his difficulty as a writer[6] not in rendering the story but in giving it an objective and acceptable perspective. Conrad and the narrators, that is, Marlow and the first narrator carry the yoke of the turn of the century malaise and its their utmost difficult duty to render it with grace and dignity. This is where Conrad remains a master storyteller weaving the yarns and leaving loose ends.

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[6] See Ashcroft et al.The Empire Writes Back.Routledge,2003 and Edward Said's.*Culture and Imperialism*.Knopf,1993.

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