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**DREAMER'S PRIVILEGE: THE SILENT TRUTH IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*
AND *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED***

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ABSTRACT

The strategies implemented by Joseph Conrad and Tim O'Brien in narrating the traumatic experiences to sound like dreams allow the narratives to leave the unspeakable truth unspoken – the silence which leaves room for the contradictions in a complicated reality. The truth that Conrad's Marlow and Tim O'Brien try to convey to their readers is not simple at all, and it is clothed in mystery, darkness, and the silence in the dream-like narratives of Marlow and O'Brien, admitting their limits as individuals to reach to that truth and the impossibility of completely conveying that sensation to their readers. This research will first look at the two fallacies – empiricist fallacy and normative fallacy – in literary criticism explained by Pierre Macherey and apply his theory in interpreting and finding similarities in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Things They Carried*. The narrative insulation, the surreal description of the reality, and the appeal to the listener's senses effectively establish the two narratives into literature. The strategies implemented by the two narratives will further be compared to the cinematic techniques in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, cinematic adaptation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Despite the applause the movie receives for conveying the reality in Vietnam War, the cinematic techniques such as the voice-over and the overlapping images in the opening and closing scenes do not leave room for silence found in Conrad and O'Brien's narratives and thus seem weak in conveying the complicated reality of the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Tim O'Brien, *Apocalypse Now*, Pierre Macherey, dream narrative, silence, truth

Introduction

“It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream— making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams...” (Conrad 30). Marlow gives a concise description of his own narrative of his experience in Africa. Joseph Conrad, in his novella *Heart of Darkness*, employs some strategies to make Marlow's narrative sound and feel like a dream of one man. This research will look at how this dream-like narrative admits an individual's limits to completely convey the complicated reality and how this allows the narrative to leave the unspeakable truth unspoken – the silence which leaves room for the contradictions in a complicated reality. This research will study Pierre Macherey's theory on literary criticism written in his *A Theory of Literary Production* and apply his theory to prove that the truth in *Heart of Darkness* lies in what is unspoken or what is implicitly stated in the novella.

Marlow's "Inconclusive Experience"

From the beginning, Conrad insulates the narrative; the story is told by a man named Charlie Marlow, which in turn is heard by the original and anonymous story-teller, elongating the distance between the reader and the story. Even before Marlow moves further on with his story, the anonymous story-teller further mystifies this narrator in the inner layer by describing him as "with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards" (Conrad 7) resembling an idol and having "the pose of a Buddha" (Conrad 10). Also, the anonymous narrator warns the readers of possible confusion and distress that might be caused by Marlow's narration of his "inconclusive experiences" (Conrad 11) : "But Marlow was not typical... and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze..." (Conrad 9). Also, in midst of Marlow's story, the original narrator himself affirms the dream-like quality of Marlow's narrative and the uneasiness and the difficulties it produces: "I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river" (Conrad 30).

Marlow's descriptions of different places add sense of unreality to his story. For example, in describing his destination, he describes the river as "resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land" (Conrad 12) and the place he has signed the contract as "a whited sepulchre" (Conrad 13). Also, the original narrator gives emotion or personality to places or the atmosphere: "It (Thames) had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin..." and "Only the gloom to the west brooding over the upper reaches became more sombre every minute as if angered by the approach of the sun. While describing these unreal places or the atmospheres in detail, usually in a foreboding manner, Marlow omits detailed description of common, real-life places— for example, his aunt's room which he only mentions as "just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look" (Conrad 15).

The dream-like quality of the narrative, achieved by giving personality to the ambiguous things such as a place or an atmosphere, leaves room for silence, a space to leave some questions or some contradictions unanswered. "I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you— smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering— Come and find out" (Conrad 16). "The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion" (Conrad 17). Here, Marlow masks the enigma as a coast luring seaman, or the truth of things as something that can be obstructed by "the oily and languid sea" and "the uniform sombreness of the coast." Their surrealness excuses Marlow from further explaining what that enigma is and what it is about and also what the truth of things is.

Not everything in Marlow's narrative is surreal. "All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man (brickmaker) jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace" (Conrad 29). Marlow describes the brickmaker and the Manager's desire to move up their post as the only real feeling there. While the brickmaker, mistaking Marlow as having some influence in Europe, jabbars in his self-appeal, Marlow's interest is in the "stillness" of the atmosphere. This seems to point to the story's emphasis on the truth within the surrealness and the mystery of the story, not in the real event. It is difficult, however, to discern what is real and unreal in Marlow's narrative. Marlow mentions the Company's

chief accountant: "When near the buildings I met a white man in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision" (Conrad 21). The accountant's orderliness and his proficiency are unreal and in contrast with the chaos of the place: "... his books was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still tree-tops of the grove of death" (Conrad 22).

In addition to the descriptions of the places and the atmosphere, the plot of Marlow's narrative— specifically, delayed meeting of Marlow with Kurtz— further makes Marlow's story feel like a dream. Marlow first encounters Kurtz through the chief accountant: "I wouldn't have mentioned the fellow... only it was from his lips that I first heard the name of the man who is so indissolubly connected with the memories of that time" (Conrad 21). Thence, Marlow's dream becomes search for Kurtz— who, in the long process of finding him, is only indirectly available to Marlow. Marlow can only hear about Kurtz and imagine what he would be like. In order to find more about him, Marlow goes as far as to lie to the brickmaker, an act that he detests so much. The obsession to find this mysterious man causes Marlow to undermine himself to get on with the dream; Marlow's distress manifests itself in his obsession with rivets: "What I really wanted was rivets, by heaven! Rivets. To get on with the work— to stop the hole. Rivets I wanted... and there wasn't one rivet to be found where it was wanted" (Conrad 35). At last, Marlow could not have the rivets, and he gives up: "I had given up worrying myself about the rivets" (Conrad 33). This obsession with one goal, one's inability to reach it, and its seemingly pointlessness all represent a dream that could be distressful.

This dream-like narrative, while it also describes in detail the thoughts of the narrators, repeatedly appeals to the readers or the listeners' senses. "Flames glided on the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other— then separating slowly or hastily" (Conrad 11). When Marlow listens to the Company's chief accountant or the brickmaker about this man named Kurtz, there is the sound of a sick man or a beaten man groaning in the background: "... the silence of the land went home to one's very heart— its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life. The hurt nigger moaned feebly somewhere near by..." (Conrad 28). These rhythmic and repeated descriptions of the surreal atmosphere which appeal to the readers' and the listeners' senses work to hypnotize the readers and the listeners. In general, they admonish the readers of the imminent danger and approaching doom— pointing to the helplessness and futility of an individual, vainly trying to grasp the answer or the truth in the midst of the immense mystery, enigma, and darkness: "By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth stuck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (Conrad 26).

The Two Fallacies

Pierre Macherey, in his *A Theory of Literary Production*, explains two main fallacies related to what literary criticism is: empiricist fallacy and normative fallacy. Empiricists, called by Macherey as "naive consumers," neglect irreducibility of the distance between the knowledge— literary criticism— and the object — literary work. (Macherey 18) They believe in the spontaneous truth in the literary work, which lends it independent from all the other ideologies. (Macherey 15) This view, however, makes reality, inexplicable and leads to the misunderstanding that the work is produced by chance when it is actually a product of labor. (Macherey 56) Trying to find the truth only within the work, the empiricism simply consumes literary work as it is. If Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is interpreted by these empiricists, the insulation of the narrative, the

surreal description of the places and the atmosphere, delayed meeting of Marlow and Kurtz, and the appeal to the senses would have no meaning or truth, but it can be taken as mere trickeries to entertain the readers and the listeners. While Conrad purposefully employs the strategies to make the narrative—the product of his labour—sound surreal and dreamlike, empiricists would take his strategies, not as Conrad's purposeful effort to convey the reality, but as a chance product of enjoyment. To the empiricists, there is no reality; reality does not exist behind the unfathomable enigma and the darkness expressed by Conrad.

On the other hand, normative fallacy, called the “harsh judge” by Macherey, believes that literature's “only reality is its relationship to the model which was the very condition of its elaboration” (Macherey 19). This fallacy tries to strip literary work of its novelty and assimilate literary work to an ideology or a norm that is outside itself, something that is different. Early critics of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* seem to have committed this fallacy. These critics interpreted Conrad's novella as a criticism of the colonialism in Congo, stripping the novella of its originality and dimension. Taking the explicit passages like “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only” (Conrad 6) and “They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now,—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom” (Conrad 20), the whole novella is interpreted as a criticism of the European colonization in Africa, showing the hypocrisy of Europeans taking advantages of the native land and people of Africa in the name of civilization and the cruelty committed by these colonizers.

So, what is the reality in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* according to Pierre Macherey? Pierre Macherey differentiates a literary work's autonomy from its independence. Literary work, which “ought to be the object of a specific science” (Macherey 59), has its own laws of using language and ideology. It is not just a product of a controlled ideological project. However, this autonomy should not be confused with independence. A literary work is not just improvised by magic, but it is a product of labor. (Macherey 77) It is built on “the principle of rationality which makes the work accessible to thought.” (Macherey 56) Thus, it is influenced by and related to the things that are exterior to it. The two fallacies—empiricism and normative fallacy—are similar in that they try to centralize the work: empiricism to the spontaneous truth within the work which has no reality and normative fallacy to an ideology or a norm that is outside the work. There is no single meaning or unity of meanings in literary work whether intrinsic or extrinsic. It has multiple elements in relation to each other, and literary criticism is there to measure the gap between different elements of literary work by studying the implicit, unspoken words in the work. As explained above, Conrad's strategies to make his narrative sound and feel like a dream allows some rooms for silence—unspoken, unanswered, unexplained, and implicit secrets and truth. The truth, the reality, does exist in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, contrary to how the empiricists would argue, but that reality does not exist in the explicit statements in the narrative but in the unspoken and the implicit words in the narrative, preventing simplified interpretation of the normative fallacy.

To further explain how the reality can be interpreted from a literary work, Pierre Macherey explains Lenin's view of Tolstoy's work as the “Mirror of the Russian Revolution”; “the literary work only makes sense if considered in its relation to a determinate historical period” (Macherey 120). The “determinate historical period” or the reality that a literary work tries to convey to its readers is, however, very complex. The

history from 1861 to 1905 is composed of different elements— landed aristocracy, peasantry, bourgeoisie, and proletariat— whose different interests and different ideologies are in conflicts and in relationships with each other, which are not in themselves so simple. Lenin explains this by the images of different contradictions in Tolstoy's work— landlord obsessed with Christ, powerful protest against hypocrisy, jaded intellectual, and merciless criticism of capitalism. Macherey says that a scientific analysis, which formulates its systematic laws of measuring the distance between multiple meanings of its object, must consider all these elements, establishing the relationship between them rather than priorities.

The Privileged Glimpse

In addition to the complexity of the reality, which is not uniform in nature, Lenin also explains the partiality of the reflection, “a unique and privileged glimpse” (Macherey 126) of the author. This is because the reflection is mediated by a specific ideology, ideology encountered by Tolstoy. Lenin calls this the “great artistic gift... embodied in a specific ‘perception’ of the historical process and of ideological motives” (Macherey 130). The historical process with its deficiencies is rendered transparent by this gift of specific perception according to Lenin. Applying this concept of the artist's privileged glimpse, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can also be seen as the reflection of the reality in Congo through the privileged glimpse of a white traveler named Charlie Marlow. The reality in Africa is not simple at all; the reality— its meaning and its contradictions— is clothed in mystery, darkness, and the silence in the dream-like narrative of Marlow, who also conveys his limit as an individual to reach to that truth and the impossibility of conveying that sensation to his listeners.

Charlie Marlow does make mistakes, his partiality in conveying his experience as an individual with the privileged glimpse of Africa. Chinua Achebe points to the racist tendency of Marlow, which had been often ignored by the critics. Marlow is perplexed— perhaps even disgusted— by the natives who seem out of their places. “Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; 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 that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at” (Conrad 17). The African natives described as eyeballs, bones, and muscles rowing the boat, as primitive beings, comforts Marlow. This may be compared to Marlow's response to his other encounters with the natives: “And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs... He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank...” (Conrad 38) and “He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck— Why? Where did he get it... It looked startling round his black neck this bit of white thread from beyond the seas” (Conrad 21). While the sight of the African natives who are in their place as the primitive beings comforts Marlow, the other natives, still “savages”, who are either trained or who merely have objects belonging to the civilized confounds Marlow, and Marlow ridicules them by comparing them to a “a dog in a parody of breeches.”

Chinua Achebe also points out that in describing his fear of the possible connection between himself, the civilized, and the savages, the primitive beings, Marlow degrades the African nation and its people as a foil against which to describe the

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Europeans themselves. “No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it— this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity— like yours— the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly” (Conrad 37-38). Achebe further argues that this racism in *Heart of Darkness* cannot be excused because Conrad “neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame or reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters.”

Achebe’s argument that Conrad willfully degrades the African natives into primitive beings against which the Europeans must protect themselves is based on Marlow’s personal opinions of the native Africans explicitly stated in his narrative. Whether the narrative is in need of “an alternative frame or reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of” Marlow should be looked in the light of the nature of the narrative. The narrative implements strategies to make the story sound unreal and feel like a dream of one man. The reality, what the story tries to convey, is not simple at all, and this truth of things and the unspeakable secret covered in the immense and unfathomable mystery is only perceived by the privileged glimpse of a man named Marlow. Even from the beginning, Marlow has warned the impossibility of conveying the real-life sensation he himself felt in the land of darkness to his listeners. In such a narrative, the truth does not lie in what is explicitly stated, but the truth and the reality, as Pierre Macherey explains, lies in what is implicitly stated and can only be conveyed in its incompleteness. The truth lies in the conflict between Marlow’s fear of his kinship with the people he calls savages and the primitive beings and the strange attraction he feels—the “fascination of the abomination” (Conrad 10) — toward this land of darkness: “And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window it fascinated me as a snake would a bird— a silly little bird... The snake had charmed me” (Conrad 12). Or the readers should pay attention to Marlow’s questions that are left unanswered: “Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn’t go for us— they were thirty to five— and have a good tuck-in for once amazes me now when I think of it” (Conrad 42).

Conclusion

What is the unspeakable secret, the truth of things, in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*? Some would argue that the truth does not exist in the novella, or some would assimilate the truth, the essence, of the story into a criticism against the cruelty committed by the Europeans against the African natives in the name of civilization or a willful attempt to degrade the African natives as those that are inferior and primitive which the civilized people have to watch out against. The truth in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* remains unspoken. The narrative strategies— insulating Marlow’s narration with the original and anonymous narrator, adding unreality to the story by giving the places and the atmosphere emotions and personality, and the hypnotizing and nightmarish plot of the story— makes Marlow’s story feel like a dream. This dream-like narrative, in turn, allow Marlow to leave what he terms the enigma, the secret, and the truth to be left incomplete and unexplained. The complex truth, which is reflected in Lenin’s fragmented mirror in Tolstoy’s case, is, in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, dreamed by Marlow, whose dream can only be conveyed through Marlow’s privileged glimpse to his listeners.

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