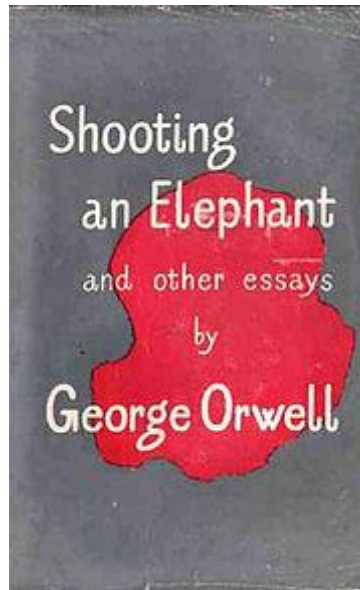


Journey through a Traveller's Eyes

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Abstract

The paper explores the perception of a travel writer that often constructs the piece of writing, and the truth value it carries. Perception itself is subjective and preconditioned by the cultural and social background of an observer. Yet the affordances (a clue to the function of an object) available in every interpretative activity bring new perspectives to the existing perception. The reader of travel writings visits a foreign land through the eyes of the travel writer and constructs the picture of the land from his perception of the textual world. Under such circumstances it is fascinating to analyse how the traveller gathers his experience of the world and how authentic his perception is.

Key Words: Travel Writing, Perception, Representation, Modality.

Introduction

Everyone is born in a certain semiosphere that lends him eyes to see the world. In the postmodern era, the emphasis is more on discourse and its mediated reality. The knowledge of the world is handed over to its members through sign systems which carry subjective truth

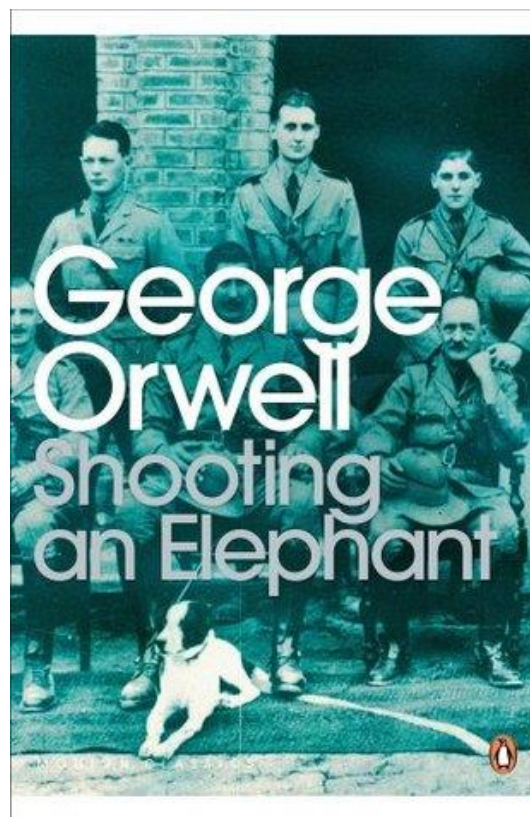
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and are not efficient enough to represent the whole of the truth at one time. Hence modality questions the truth value of such representation in terms of facts vs. fiction, reality vs. fantasy, real vs. artificial, actual vs. fake and so on. Since absolute truth cannot be determined and truth is determined from the context, semioticians never judge how true is a representation but seek to know how truly it is represented. Under such circumstances it is worthwhile to see how perception of a travel writer gets formed in an extra-textual world, represented in a textual world, and seems true to the readers.

The paper takes into account George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* for analysis at three levels – Perception, Representation and Modality.



Perception of World

A traveller going to a foreign land leaves his homeland with a preconditioned mind. He glimpses the world as his culture allows not through the culture of the travelled land. So the perception of the traveller will be different from the people of the travelled place. Stevenson remarks nicely when he says: "There is no foreign land; it is only the traveller who is foreign" (2001: 53). Both the seer and the seen have different perspectives of the same truth. The travel writers are mostly military officers, missionaries, explorers, scientists, pilgrims, and migrants. Accordingly their way of looking at the world become prominent in

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their writings with little bit of fiction to make the text appealing. As for the readers when they travel through the traveller's eyes they assume his personality.

Alien Eyes

Shooting an Elephant is a travel essay, a heart touching account based on anti-imperialist Orwell's days at Burma when he was posted there (1922-1927) as an officer of Indian Imperial Police. He went there with a preconditioned mind – a hatred for Imperialism and bitterness to comply the orders of British Government to serve there. A hatred for oppressor would have eventually created a sympathetic heart for the oppressed Burmese people. But at Burma he went through a different experience. He could feel the anti-European feeling which though could not be raised through riots yet often got expressed through uncivilised acts like spitting betel juice over European women in bazaars. He himself was often victimised in football matches when he was tripped up by a Burmese and the referee (another Burmese) looked the other way. Such an act was often followed by hideous laughter.

Orwell's painful experience was the outcome of the inner conflict going on in his mind – a hatred for Imperialism and hatred from the colonised. He could neither assimilate himself to the land from where he came nor could find a place for him in an alien land and culture.

Magisterial Gaze

But what is remarkable here is that in spite of his hatred for Imperialism he remained a product of that, his subconscious mind fully programmed by it. His perception got reflected thus:

As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. ... But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. ... All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in *saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I

thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. (2003: para2)

The revelation speaks of his magisterial gaze with which he looked at the Burmese people. Though he himself admits that he was 'young and ill-educated' yet it may be because of his cultural background and social status that he thought himself superior to the Burmese people. That's why he always felt offended when yelled at 'with hideous laughter' or jeered at by the young Buddhist monks. At one point he admits that he is with the local people and on the other, he imagines about the joy he will feel by driving a bayonet into a Buddhist priest. Even a difference of skin colour is prevalent in his mind when he distinguishes the Burmese by their yellow faces.

Morality vs. Imperialism

The real enlightenment about imperialism was received by him through a tiny incident. He was informed about an elephant broke loose due to sexual desire (*must*). He went to maintain order and frighten the elephant with his .44 Winchester rifle but seeing a native (a Coringhee, coolie) already dead asked for an elephant rifle and five cartridges. He never thought of killing that elephant on moral ground. Even asking for that rifle was an act to save himself from becoming another devilish corpse. But ironically he himself was trapped in the situation. As he describes two thousand Burmese started following him expecting him to kill the beast that had gone on a rampage, killing a cow, destroying crops and houses and causing the death of a native.

Every Whiteman's struggle in East was to protect his reputation and not to be laughed at. And the better choice was to live without action. But Orwell was compelled to act in that situation. Though morally he was against killing the elephant yet as a British officer he was duty bound to take action. He was "pushed to and fro by the will of these yellow faces behind" (para7). Later he thought he ought to "walk within twenty five yards to test his behaviour" (para9). If the elephant charged at him he would shoot; if not, he would reveal that the elephant no longer posed a threat. But his insecurities (both physical and psychological) with a gun compelled him to do his best – to kill the elephant. He shot five times with the elephant gun and as the elephant didn't die he shot with a normal rifle to finish the job. When the elephant didn't die he left the place and later learnt that the elephant lived for another half an hour. The Burmese people had the meat they wanted and Orwell learnt

that he was legally right for shooting the elephant. The elephant became a victim of British Imperialists' need to save his face.

Transformation

But the act itself was an agent in transforming his perception. For some people it was a legal action. But for him it was though legal yet an immoral act. Moreover, his action was less legal than personal. He killed the elephant only to save his reputation as a white man and often wondered “whether any others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking like a fool” (para14) and he also “grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East” (para7) and “perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys” (para7). What is worthwhile to find is the fact that the imperialism he hated the most in fact was the cause for his action. Ironically his action itself suggests that he was in reality a colonised though acted as a coloniser. His action was psychologically conditioned by the colonised's behaviour. But from the Burmese people's perspective it exposed the cultural hegemony. The Burmese people took for granted that Orwell being a Westerner or British officer should come to their rescue.

Whereas Orwell's perceptions and morality are preconditioned by the culture and society he comes from, the imperialism is a guiding factor of his perception of the Burmese people, their culture and society. With a white man's superiority the spitting of betel juices, the tripping up of himself in football matches, the laughter of people, the jeering of young Buddhist monks – all looked intentional. Such experience in Burmese land steered his actions though his insight pronounced them immoral. When it comes to choose he prefers imperialism, which he always considered immoral, to morality.

Representation

The readers journeying through a traveller's eyes construct the images of places, people and object as have been described. The piece of writing is well constructed and even seems autobiographical in nature. It seems Orwell chose the form of essay to express his feelings about imperial attitude of his home. But the narrative structure gives it a fictitious character. And above all, it reinforces the idea of otherness.

Hybrid of Discourses

Orwell in his essay has brought many discourses in to play – Imperialism, anti-European feeling, ethnography, Psychology, pretension, ethics and so on. It has represented

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every minute detail of the outside world and the inner world of the author himself. Orwell has given vivid images of the land and the people – bamboo huts thatched with palm leaf, ignorant people, women prohibiting children to see dead man, muddy land, metalled road, paddy fields, and crowd gathering to see Orwell in action and so on. Even he has exposed his mind elaborately – his hatred for Burmese manners, his feeling of superiority, his fear for the elephant which resulted in the death of the elephant, his painful experience, his sense of guilt and so on. The most striking picturisation was the death images – the dead body of the coolie and the death of elephant. Orwell has so minutely narrated that image that one can visualise it in his imagination. Even the emotion of Orwell is so clearly described that one can feel how he felt while killing the elephant. It is noteworthy that where as he humanized the elephant, he dehumanized the Burmese by calling them beasts – a representation of his subconscious mind. The same feeling was also noticed when old British officers considered his act legal and young officers told that an elephant is worth than any coolie but from a different perspective. Furthermore, it is remarkable to see that he has explored similarities in two different cultures when he describes how the excited crowd gathered to see the fun of seeing an elephant die as people of his own culture would have done: “it was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd” (para5). Everything looks as factual as in real world but presented subjectively as often happens in any narrative. The readers’ perception goes along with the development in the textual world.

Modality

In this post-modern age it is easy to judge reliability but very difficult to determine reality. Though the representations may seem reliable yet they may not be real because reality can be distorted to serve different purposes. Semioticians advocate that reality is not the reality of the world but only an aspect of it, often modified and simulated. Modality of a text depends on two parties – the writer and the reader. Whereas writer controls the modality the reader approves it or denies it.

Modality vis-a-vis Perception

In Orwell’s account, though the author’s perception of Burmese society is well reflected, yet it is seen through a Whiteman’s eyes. Orwell professes that he is an anti-imperialist but still has that background. The perception of Orwell is never validated by the native’s actions. The laughter in football field, sneering yellow faces, the jeering Buddhist Monks are Orwell’s perceptions that a reader is bound to feel. The fact that the actions of the

natives were intentionally offensive is never authenticated but perceived. Orwell could only express that since it happened more than once he took it as intentional. Even when he compares his morality and sympathetic heart with the beastly nature of the Burmese (wishing the elephant to be dead so that they can get meat) it creates suspicion. And above all, generalising the imperialist's view of the colonised (elephant is worth more than coolie) looks a bit hyperbolic.

Fact vs Fiction

Considering all these aspects it is relevant to ask whether his description can be called a true account. Whether it is factual or fantasy is a debatable issue. Though it happens in Moulmein, lower Burma, yet the author does not mention any specific time apart from the fact that it happened during rainy days. And if at all it happened the readers get only one aspect of the reality – through the author's eyes. So it is useless to ponder over the reality of the account. Rather readers can focus on the reliability of the account. The description looks quite reliable. The place, the people, the behaviour, the event seem very much realistic to the readers' mind.

Orwell has tried to keep the modality high by using a language structure that establishes his confident perception. If it will be analysed with Halliday's (1985) parameters the account has a high subjective modality as the genre is that of narrative. This automatically negates the presence of objective modality. Even the actions of Burmese people are subjectively presented. Can the account have frequency modality is questionable. Neither the perception of Orwell about Imperialism nor his view of the Burmese people can be considered general views so as to quote elsewhere. But it can serve as a great example of a universal experience of doing something immoral as a demand of humanity, doing something futile to keep one's vanity intact. Nonetheless, 'a willing suspension of disbelief' from the readers may universalize the perceptions of Orwell and construct the identity of the Burmese as well as the Imperialists.

Conclusion

The experiences of a traveller in the foreign place and that in his homeland are dialectically related. Obviously the experiences of the homeland influence one's perception of the foreign land to a great extent. But at the same time it cannot be denied that the eyes of the traveller with which he once looked his homeland before his departure goes through

transformation. The difference of sight changes the whole perceptive process and one's own culture and identity are redefined.

Any perception is subjective but true as it reflects an aspect of reality. Orwell's perception was subjective but anti-imperialism, Whiteman's vanity, social status as a police officer and Burma as a colony certainly affected his perception of the land. The expression and perception are inter-related. Whether the reader sees whatever the traveller has seen or just sees what one's mind allows, is another perspective of analysis. But it cannot be denied that reality is neither perceived by the traveller nor by the readers in totality. Nevertheless, the reader's experience though borrowed and different from that of the traveller is a new experience which adds to one's perceptive process. The more reliable the representation looks the more factual it becomes. The travel in the realm of fantasy may produce travel writings even encompassing serious discourses but will lose reliability. Lastly, journeying through a traveller's eyes is like hiring a guide on a travel who will describe everything but will not attend to the visitor's curiosity. Journey through a traveller's eyes is precarious in comparison to that of other writers because a travel writer comes with a reliable personality and many facts but can mislead.

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