

The Real Past and Its Representation

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the impossibility of knowing the past. It is done not by keeping aside the structure of historical writing, rather with an effective exposition of it. The so-called accepted versions in which the historical writings proliferated has been demystified. Such attempts are inevitable as the very medium, namely language has been disassociated from what it had climbed to signify or represent. To exemplify this particular concept, the chosen texts are seen in the light of historiographic metafiction. The governing principle of historical framework is set to be monolithic or intended to produce what the historian/writer could have fancied. The revisionist perception does not entertain any idea/concept to establish supremacy over the given scenario. Therefore, relevant passages and events are to be picked out from the literary works in order to validate their authenticity. It is to be justified through a potential radicalization of views, set sharply against the major institutions such as author, historian and history.

Key words: *Demystify, Historiography, Authenticity, Historical Framework, Institution*

Traditionally, history was considered to be the record of objective facts existing independently of the historian. In order to reflect historical events in an objective way, the historian relies on archival research, primary source and eyewitnesses. The objectivity is further enhanced by accurate quotation, documentation in footnotes, citation and bibliography. This kind of conventional history writing reminds one of the scientific aspects of the history. In this connection, Onega comments that history was seen as “an empirical search for external truths corresponding to what was considered to be the absolute reality of the past events” (12).

This notion of history influenced the writing of historical novels, which came into vogue with Sir Walter Scott in nineteenth century. There were also instances of writing historical novels before nineteenth century. Those were some realistic novels which make use of events and personages from the historical past to add interest and picturesqueness to the narrative. In contrast, the historical novels of nineteenth century not only take its setting and some characters and some events from history, but also make the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and the course of the narrative. Some of the greatest historical novels also use

the protagonists and actions to reveal what the author regards as the deep forces that impel the historical process.

The notion of history as the direct access to the unitary past was not questioned and challenged before the advent of poststructuralism. In other words, the emergence of poststructuralism is one of the major reasons for dismantling and subverting the foundational stone of history. In addition to this, postmodernism, which does not believe in unified, ultimate and eternal reality, argues against conventional history writing and its claims to present historical events truthfully. In fact, this notion of postmodern history relies upon poststructuralist thoughts. This dramatic shift in the notion of history had great impact not only on the general understanding of history, but also on the writing of historical novels in the second half of twentieth century. Incorporation of the postmodern philosophy of history makes the writers of historical novels deliberately distort the distinction between fact and fiction, and declare that it is no longer possible to revive the unitary and objective past constantly reminding the readers of the fictionality of the fact and factuality of the fiction.

The postmodern philosophy of history primarily lies on the poststructuralist notion of language. Poststructuralism outwardly disrupts the one-to-one correspondence between the language and reality. The language is no more the reliable medium for representing the external reality of the world. Poststructuralists argue that the reality is not out there in the world, but it is the result of our perception. This shows clearly that the representation of reality is not an absolute truth existing independently, but a human construct. This, in turn, makes the representation subject to contestation and subversion. When this is applied to history, postmodernism, which refutes both fixity of language and text and the assumed connection between language and reality, turns into a “denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past” (Himmelfarb 72).

The reliance on poststructuralism makes postmodern notion of history claim the textuality of reality. In other words, it is clear that history is a text, “a discourse which consists of representations, that is verbal formations” (Abrams 183). The awareness of the textuality of history closes the gap existing between the historian and history. In fact, it is the historian who

chooses events from archival documents and chronicles and changes into historical past. The process of historiography, when seen from the perspective of poststructuralist, reiterates the fact that even though history seems to represent external reality, history as a text is a construct. The way of looking at history as a text also leads to the interpretation of literary texts in the context of social, political and cultural history. This has resulted in parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts. In this connection, it is worth quoting Louis Montrose's discussion of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history:

By historicity of texts I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing...By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question...secondly that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the documents upon which historians ground their own texts, called 'histories.' (20)

Subsequently, the presence of contradictory histories opposed to single 'History' has been acknowledged. The postmodernist view of history "rejects the idea of history as a direct accessible, unitary past and substitutes for it the conception of 'histories,' an ongoing series of human constructions" (Cox and Reynolds 4).

The selection and omission of the events from archival documents and chronicles by the historian serves much greater purpose. History is not to be seen merely as a text. Rather, history is monologic and hegemonic representing the dominant discourse. The omission of certain events of the past has been done deliberately in order to deny official voices for the marginalized. This shows that there is no direct access to past and "the cultural and ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm and propagate the power-structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society" (Abrams 184). The history and literature, which was earlier believed to be extreme opposites, have been placed in the same plane and considered to be inseparable. As a result, history, like literature, comes to be a "product of language and a narrative discourse" that consists of representations of historical conditions and similar power-structure (Schleifer and Davis 373). Furthermore, historians no

longer claim that their study is objective and able unproblematically to represent the external reality, “the past is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns” (Selden 188).

Hayden White contributes to the postmodern philosophy of history by elaborating his concept of history based on the theories of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Genette in his *Metahistory*. In *Metahistory*, he attempts to answer the questions concerning the epistemological status of historical explanations and the possible forms of historical representation. According to White, narration is the only form of historical representation. This draws a parallel line between history and literature. Moreover, he also goes on to argue that the traditional historiography depend on narrative form in which historians convey the knowledge of the past.

In “Historical Texts as Literary Artifact,” White discusses history in relation to literary terms. Commonly, stories and plot are terms associated with literature. In contrast, White argues that even in history is made of stories. Historians take up fragmented events from chronicles and turn into a sensible and logical story. White considers this to be a necessary part of historians because “histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles” (223). Mostly, it is believed that the chronicles are fragmentary and incomplete and it is the obligation of the historian to make a plausible story out of the facts through encodation of facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structure” (White 223). This obligation to make stories is the reason for the presence of the story elements in history writing. White further explains how the story elements bring history writing to the level of the composition of literary piece:

The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies and the like – in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play (223).

The parallel drawn between history and literature suggests that history can be written and rewritten in a number of different ways so as to provide multiple interpretations of historical events serving different ideologies and worldviews. The historians cannot reach the context of

historical events in a definite way. This makes them invent the context in order to make the past events significant and meaningful. As a result of this conscious invention of the historians, historical works are “verbal fictions, the contents of which are much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (White 222). The above argument turns the basic assumption of history as objective and truthful to be false. It is impossible to retrieve the historical past as such without the interruption of the historian or any established ideology of that particular society.

Geoffrey Braithwaite, the central character of Flaubert’s *Parrot*, goes in search of the real past of Flaubert. Particularly, he is interested in the parrot which Flaubert used as a model in creating Loulou, the absurdly named, symbolically charged bird at the centre of his famous short story, *Un Coeur simple* (A Simple Heart). What is of significance in Braithwaite’s search for the real past is that he adopts the methods of traditional historian and at the same time parodies it. His biography is not in the usual ‘Flaubert was born in’, ‘his father was’, ‘he is known for’ and ‘he died’ manner. Before analysing Barnes’ assertion that it is impossible to seize the past and deliberate distortion of the past, the brief biographical account of Flaubert is given.

Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), French novelist of the realist period, is known best for his sensational *Madame Bovary* (1857), a classic tale of romance and retribution. It is a portrait of the young provincial Emma Bovary as fallen woman and her adulterous liaisons with Rodolphe Boulanger. (It was criticized and banned for a period after its first release).

Gustave Flaubert was born in Rouen, France on 12 December 1821, the fifth of six children in a family of doctors. His father, Achille-Cléophas Flaubert was chief surgeon in Rouen. (He died in 1846). Flaubert’s mother, Anne Justine Caroline (née Fleuriot), was the daughter of a physician, and was to become one of the most influential people in his life and works. (She died in 1872). In the 1830s Flaubert attended the Collège Royal de Rouen, writing for its newspaper, reading Shakespeare, travelling extensively and at the age of fourteen began in earnest his own writings, inspired by his unconsummated love affair at this time with the much older and married Elisa Schlésinger. After unsuccessfully studying law in Paris in the early 1840s, the perfectionist in Flaubert (one of his maxims being: “Be regular and orderly in your life like a bourgeois, so that you may be violent and original in your work.”) begins a brisk

period of further Correspondence with various family and friends, including Emile Zola and Georges Sand. He once wrote to Sand “The age of politics is over” and thus he began developing his philosophy of rejection of The State and Neo-Catholic political and social views of his time. After the death of his father, Flaubert lived in Rouen for the rest of his life. His malady of nervous fits (which may have been epilepsy that started when he was around twenty-two years of age) caused him to be sequestered at home much of the time for treatments of it, while allowing him the peace to continue his writings, including the mock-epic *Sentimental Education* (1870) and *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1874), set in the 4th century.

In 1848 the twenty-six year old Flaubert went to Paris with his good friend Louis Bouilhet to witness the Revolution. Flaubert embarked on a trip to Egypt and the Far East with fellow writer Maxime Du Camp in 1851, sending home a varied assortment of exotic souvenirs. Nearly thirty years old now he then took the next five years to write *Madame Bovary*, working mostly at night, having it published in six instalments by Du Camp’s literary journal *Revue de Paris*. The ensuing moral outrage in 1857 caused him to be (unsuccessfully) prosecuted on moral grounds. This tumultuous period was followed in the 1860s with his continued association with Napoleon III and his court and progress in writing especially with the publication of *Salammbô* in 1863, about ancient Carthage. Flaubert begins his final revision for *Sentimental Education*, his time spent at school in Paris the inspiration for it.

In 1870 Flaubert became very sick, but continued to write after attaining Chevalier, Legion of Honour, though ironically he resisted ennobling human nature in his writings. Anne Justine Caroline Flaubert, his mother, died in 1872, the one woman to provide constancy and comfort to Gustave. Afflicted by syphilis and rapidly declining health, two weeks before his death, he told his niece Caroline, “Sometimes I think I’m liquefying like an old Camembert.” *Three Tails* (1877) contains *A Simple Heart*, his tribute to Georges Sand, Saint Julien and Herodias. On 8 May, 1880, Flaubert suddenly died from brain haemorrhage. He is buried at Rouen Cemetery in Normandy, France alongside another literary giant Marcel Duchamp. His unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet* was published in 1880, followed by his *Correspondence* in 1923, containing the letters and forever immortalizing the tumultuous love affair between himself and Louise Colet.

The above given biographical account of Flaubert seems to be the exact representation of Flaubert's life and his writing. Julian Barnes, though seems to go in search of the real past of Flaubert, deliberately distorts the existing historical documents of Flaubert. In other words, he is aware of both the impossibility of the past to be integrally regained and the fact that discourses only approximate the disparate data of history. This becomes evident in the attempt of Geoffrey Braithwaite to reach the past and his difficulties of doing so. Flaubert's Parrot seems to be a historical text, but, in fact, it is parodying the genre.

The novel opens with Braithwaite's description of the Flaubert's statue in Rouen where he was born and brought up. This gives indication of the historical theme of the novel and further, the opening pages suggest how Barnes will develop it in the pages to follow. Braithwaite comments on the statue of Flaubert which has been erected there in the place des Carmes. While commenting on the statue, he reminds that this statue was not the original. The Germans took the first statue and it was replaced by the statue constructed by a foundry in Chatillon-sous-Bagneux. The foundry assured that this statue would last for a long time. Braithwaite is sceptical about the foundry's assurances noting that "nothing much else to do with Flaubert has ever lasted. He died little more than a hundred years ago, and all that remains of him is paper. Paper, ideas, phrases, metaphors, structured prose which turns into sound" (12). It would not take much time to get rid of the statue of Flaubert. If one mayor, who loves statue, put it up, others who are bookish may take it down.

Braithwaite has many reasons for returning to Rouen. Ostensibly, he is there to learn about Flaubert, but he is also confronted by some ghosts from his own past. He fought with the allied forces here in 1944 and he visits the place where those forces landed. He also visits Bayeux "to examine that other cross-channel invasion of nine centuries earlier" (14). Braithwaite tries to link his own historical actions with those of earlier times. He also attempts to seek meaning through continuity in history, but he remains emotionally detached, "memories came out of hiding, but not emotions; not even the memory of emotions" (14).

Braithwaite's visit to Rouen is not only an attempt to get back the past of Flaubert, but also his own past. In doing so, he also critiques the very search for unique and fixed past. While describing the statue of Flaubert, he attacks the traditional way of studying an author. Focussing

on author's biographical details, documents and other objects used and touched by the author, Braithwaite argues that it is futile to go after other documents other than the writing of the author, "Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't the books enough? . . . the image, the face, the signature; the 93 percent copper statue and the Nadar photograph" (12). Moreover, when he feels alienated from his own past, he comes to a conclusion that it is difficult to grab the past and importantly, there is no such as unified and fixed past. In other words, it is not possible to represent the past in an organised fashion with fixed and stable points of view. He gives a concrete manifestation to this abstract concept. He uses an analogy to make one understand the fact that though efforts have been made to retrieve the past, yet it would fade and evade:

When I was a medical student, some pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall a piglet which had been smeared with grease. It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet. (14)

When it is said that it is impossible to seize the past, it does not mean that the attempts to represent the past must completely ignored. Rather, it is to be understood that the effort to get the past is inevitable and as a consequence there is a possibility of emergence of multiple points of view. This perspective is also acknowledged by Julian Barnes in the novel. This is evident in the yet another analogy of history:

There is a distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat. Along the stern rail there is a line of telescopes; each brings the shore into focus at given distance. If the boat is becalmed, one of the telescopes will be in continual use; it will seem to tell the whole, the unchanging truth. But this is an illusion; and as the boat sets off again, we return to our normal activity: scurrying from one telescope to another, seeing the sharpness fade in one, waiting for the blur to clear in another." (101)

The first example in the above analogy stresses the sheer difficulty of reconstructing the past. Among these would be included the difficulties of finding sources, judging their accuracy,

considering what artifacts might have already deteriorated and what ephemeral material might have already disappeared. The second example stresses perspective and its effects on what is perceived. There is no way to look at the shore except through one of the available lenses and each lens only gives a partial and temporarily useful view.

The impossibility of establishing a direct link between the past and its representation explicitly suggests the indeterminacy and instability of history. This is the reason Braithwaite's emphasis on the fact that one disobediently pursues and questions the objectivity of the written text and the significance of the writer's identity, despite their obvious unattainability. As a subsequence, what one comes across is pure parrotry, mimicry, imitation of the real, too many versions of the truth, "too many contradictions and too many undecidable bits of evidence" (Moseley 81). As a consequence, there are multiple chronologies of Flaubert's life. Julian Barnes does not stick to one way of ordering the events in the life of Flaubert. Rather, he gives the readers three strands of Flaubert's life-his career, subversion and personal. By doing so, the identity of the writer gets distorted beyond recognition. In the first sequence of chronological events in Flaubert's life covers his birth, his family, his acquaintances, entry into college, passion for a married woman, Elisa Sclesinger, sexual initiation with his one of mother's maids, his travel around Europe, entry into legal studies, abandonment of law after epileptic attack, relationship with Louise Colet, publication of *Madame Bovary*, social success, publication of his other major works and death at Croisset as a person who was widely loved. Before readers come to any conclusion about the life of Flaubert, the second strand of his life begins. The second strand of Flaubert's life encompasses death of Caroline Flaubert, death of Emile-Cleophas, his birth, death of Jules Alfred Flaubert, obsessive passion for Elisa Schlesinger, death of his father, death of Alfred le Poittevin, infected by syphilis, discontentment with his novel *Madame Bovary*, his debts and his death as an impoverished, lonely and exhausted person. In the third strand of Flaubert's life, one finds the quotations from Flaubert's works in connection with his works.

The difference among the three strands can be clearly seen in Flaubert's response to his masterpiece *Madame Bovary*. The first chronology which is official portrays Flaubert to be proud of the success brought by the publication of *Madame Bovary*, "In 1846, doubting his ability ever to write anything worth publishing, Gustave had announced, 'if I do make an

appearance, one day, it will be in full armour'. Now his breastplate dazzles and his lance is everywhere" (25). The subversive chronology portrays a complete opposite picture of the same event. This is proved by the statement of Flaubert uttered to his friend Du Camp, "He tells Du Camp that if ever he had a stroke of good luck on the Bourse he would buy up 'at any cost' all copies of Madame Bovary in circulation: 'I should throw them into fire, and never hear of them again" (29-30). This event is once again subverted in the third strand of chronology which is too personal. This strand is a kind of a mirror of Flaubert's soul in which one finds the confession of novelist:

You had hoped to find in me a fire which scorched and blazed and illuminated everything; which shed a cheerful light, dried out damp wainscoting, made the air healthier, and rekindled life. Alas! I am only a poor nightlight, whose red wick splutters in a lake of bad oil full of water and bits of dust" (34).

The individual identity of Flaubert's self has been blurred further by a myriad of animal images and similes in the chapter entitled 'The Flaubert Bestiary'. Flaubert has associated his self with different kinds of wild animals. His associations with animals are much helpful to deduct how changes have been taking over him both physically and mentally. Flaubert seems to have enjoyed being partly human and partly beast. The variation with regard to the animalism in Flaubert has been given in a chronological manner. In fact, Flaubert wanted to buy a painting of a bear in June 1845 and entitle the painting as 'the portrait of Gustave Flaubert'. He explained that this painting should indicate his moral disposition and social temperament. He didn't stop with this. He also identified himself with many other wild and domestic animals. Interestingly, Barnes lists the associations in a chronological fashion:

... he is a lion, a tiger-a tiger from India, a boa constrictor (1841); feeling a rare plenitude of strength, he is an ox, sphinx, bittern, elephant, whale (1841). . he is an oyster in its shell (1845); a snail in its shell (1851); a hedgehog rolling up to protect itself (1853, 1857). (50)

More than these associations, the image of parrot gains much importance. The parrot is considered to be human in nature. It is argued that the ability of the parrot to reproduce the voice of humans. In fact, this is why Brahmins honour them above all other birds. What is of

significance here is that one is able to draw a parallel between Flaubert and the parrot. While Flaubert carried out research on the parrot in the process of writing his novel *Un Coeur Simple*, he listed out its maladies-gout, epilepsy, aphtha and throat ulcers. The image of parrot comes in his other novels like *Souvenirs Intimes*, *Bouvard et Pecuchet* and *Salamambo*. The discussion of the link between the humans and parrot in general and relationship that exists between Flaubert and Parrot is not to be brushed aside as a mere insignificant one. In fact, the parrot becomes the symbol and evidence of Flaubert's existence. Braithwaite's wish to find out the stuffed parrot used by Flaubert in a way becomes his attempt at establishing a personal relationship with the world of the one he worships and who dominates his preoccupations. According to the physician, George Braithwaite, the stuffed parrot serves as the direct testimony to the writer's existence. He also believes that the stuffed parrot he discovered in the museum is Flaubert's model parrot and this makes him feel "ardently in touch with the French writer, the parrot becoming the "emblem of the writer's voice" (Patrascu 209). Though Braithwaite tries to bring back the past life of Flaubert, he also acknowledges the fact that the reconstruction of the past is sentenced to failure. This gets exemplified in the image of the parrot that no longer can be identified:

It isn't so different, the way we wander through the past. Lost, disoriented, fearful, we follow what signs there remain; we read the street names, but cannot be confident where they are. All around is wreckage. (...) A parrot's perch catches the eye. We look for the parrot. Where is the parrot. We still hear its voice; but all we can see is a bare wooden perch. The bird has flown. (60)

To readers' surprise, the process of searching for a unified identity of the writer disperses the identity further. This can be clearly seen in the chapter entitled 'The Train Spotter's Guide to Flaubert'. Mostly, this new mode of transport-railway has been overlooked. The important role of railway in the life of Flaubert has always been ignored. The narrator of the novel, Flaubert's Parrot takes up the gradual development of railways in area around Paris and Croisset and uses it to refer to the various stages in the relationship between Flaubert and Louise Colet. The neurotic and volatile nature of the life-long affair, which is known for prolonged erotic oscillation and recurrent stages of estrangement and alienation from Flaubert's side, fades symbolically in the slowly vanishing smoke from the locomotive engine, "the smoke of the railway engine stretching

out in a horizontal line, like a gigantic ostrich feather whose tip kept blowing away” (113). Even Flaubert mentions of railways rarely in his fictions. It finds place in *L’Education Sentimentale* but not as an arresting topic of discussion. Flaubert looked at the railways as a symbol of progress or civilization. In spite of this notion, Flaubert condemned the railways. Braitwaite finishes off this chapter bringing out the ironical fact that at present the loaded trains pass through the site of Flaubert’s house, which has become part of a paper factory. This symbolically dismantles the remnants of the writer’s ideologies and Flaubert’s complex and troubled self:

The swaddled goods train was drawn up about two hundred yards away, ready to make its run past Flaubert’s pavilion. It would doubtless hoot derisively as it drew level; perhaps it was carrying poisons, enema pumps and cream tarts, or supplies for chemists and mathematicians. I didn’t want to see the event. (114)

Likewise, the chapter entitled ‘Flaubert’s Apocrypha’ subverts the importance of Flaubert’s literary heritage. This chapter focuses on the significance of the works which were brilliantly envisioned, but never written and accomplished. The apocrypha proper is listed out in a systematic way-autobiography, translations and fiction. He had been aiming for a success but has failed to implement them. There were multiple subjects to be written down by him but could not do so because of certain conditions in France. He had been visualizing a voluminous work to be penned down throughout his life time but everything vanished like a bubble on a sea. There had been many unsuccessful desires for Flaubert apart from writing, says the narrator. Neither the practical nor the imaginative ideas can be brought into action by Flaubert. Starting from teenage, through adolescence and till the old age, Flaubert possessed much matured things to be executed both as a writer and as an individual. He continued dreaming till the age of thirty five. In this connection, the comment of the narrator is worthy to be noted:

But it’s also what they didn’t build. It’s the houses they dreamed and sketched. It’s the burlesque boulevards of the imagination; it’s that untaken, sauntering path between toupeed cottages; it’s the trompe-l’oeil cul-de-sac which bluffs you into the belief that you’re entering some smart avenue. (115)

In addition to this, Braithwaite’s search for the stuffed parrot used by Flaubert makes one understand the postmodern theory of history. The narrator himself acknowledges that it took two

years to solve the case of the parrot. In the course of the research, he finds two different stuffed parrots which were believed to be used by Flaubert—one in Hotel-Dieu and the other in Croisset. He also comes to know that usually there were number of stuffed parrots in the museum. These parrots get damaged as there is a possibility of eaten by moth. This shows that there is no possibility for a single stuffed parrot to remain in the museum for a long time. When he goes to the museum of Natural History, he finds only three birds remaining out of fifty original birds. He feels that there is no chance for these parrots for being Flaubert's and also believes that out of the three parrots, one could be the parrot used by Flaubert.

The realisation of the indeterminacy and instability of history, portrayal of three strands of Flaubert's life chronologically, disruption of Flaubert's identity by associating his self with different wild and domestic animals, association of his relationship with Louise with the different stages of gradual development of railways, and Flaubert's unwritten works and his unfulfilled desires and the inability of the narrator to find the exact stuffed parrot used by Flaubert prove beyond doubt that the attempt at searching for the past, though it is inevitable, is fruitless. In other words, the representation of the past is not in consonance with the real past and moreover, there is no such thing as unified and objectified past.

Brian Moore like the main narrator of Flaubert's Parrot, George Braithwaite seems to go in search for the past and represent in his fiction *Black Robe*. He has carried out research on the Jesuits and the tribes of Canada especially, he covers the events happened between 1632 and 1673. He has tried to seize the past events which happened three centuries ago. Brian Moore came to know about the Jesuits from the essay *The Jesuits of North America* written by the American historian Francis Parkman. While reading Parkman, Brian Moore discovered that the main source of Parkman's essay was the *Relations*, the voluminous letters that the Jesuits sent back to their superiors in France. So Brian Moore moved from Parkman on to the *Relations* themselves. This made him aware of an unknown and unpredictable world. He came to know that unlike the English, French and Dutch traders and explorers, the Jesuits came to North America not for furs or conquest, but to save the souls of those whom they called 'the savages'. The native people of Canada in the early part of seventeenth century were collectively referred to

as 'Les Sauvages' (the savages). The natives, for their part, spoke of the French as 'Normans' and of the Jesuit fathers as 'Blackrobes.'

The Jesuits had to learn the scatological tongues of the tribes and study their religious and customs in order to succeed in their attempt at baptising the entire tribal community. The letters sent by these Jesuits throw a better light on the early Indians of North America. The Huron, Iroquois and Algonkin were handsome, brave, incredibly cruel people who, at that early stage, were in no way dependent on the white man and in fact, judged him to be their physical and mental inferior. They practised ritual cannibalism and for reasons of religion, subjected their enemies to prolonged and unbearable tortures. Interestingly, the people, who are capable of torturing their enemies in cruel manner, could not bear to strike or reprove their unruly children. They were pleasure-loving and polygamous, sharing sexual favours with strangers as freely as they shared with their food and hearth. They despised the 'Blackrobes' for their habit of hoarding possessions. They also held the white man in contempt for his stupidity in not realising that the land, the rivers, the animals, were all possessed of a living spirit and subject to laws that must be respected. These facts about the natives were mostly based on the details given by the Jesuits. Brian Moore claims that he knows more about the natives of North America as he has gone through the works of anthropologists and historians that came before the publication of *Relations*. In fact, this made Brian Moore doubly aware of the gripping tragedy that occurred when the Indian belief in a world of night and in the power of dreams clashed with the Jesuits' preachments of Christianity and a paradise after death. Moreover, Brian Moore openly declares:

This novel is an attempt to show that each of these beliefs inspired in the other fear, hostility and despair, which later would result in the destruction and abandonment of the Jesuit missions, and the conquest of the Huron people by the Iroquois, their deadly enemy. (ix)

From the thematic point of view, *Blackrobe* portrays both the Jesuits and the natives of the North America in their own colour. By doing so, it attempts to avoid the discrepancy that one finds in the earlier account of Jesuits and the tribes. Unlike Julian Barnes, who deliberately distorts the existing historical records and documents and never claims for exact representation,

Brian Moore involves himself in the act of portraying the clash between Jesuits and the tribes in an attempt to fill the gap in the earlier research.

Usually the Jesuits are believed to be the servants of God whose only aim is to save the souls of the natives by baptising. There was no mention of Jesuits affected by the behaviour and customs of the natives. In this novel, father Laforgue is shown as deviating from his spiritual ideologies at some instances. In spite of this, he remains to be a pure Jesuit. In the course of his journey to Huron along with Algonkins, he gets a chance to move with those people very closely. When he first looked at Daniel having intercourse with the savage girl, he didn't seem to prevent the act, but hid himself behind the leaves and watched it with excitement:

He moved his head a little, peering in, not wanting to miss the next thrust of the boy's loins. And to his shock and excitement it was as though he were the boy, rearing above that savage girl . . . Laforgue began to fumble with the buttons of his cassock. Kneeling, still staring, his breathing harsh as a tearing sheet, he began to jerk furiously until his semen spurted, spilling on the ground. (55-56).

Laforgue is supposed to teach moral values, especially preventing one from indulging in sinful acts, but he becomes a victim to lust. This seems to cancel out the view that only savages are prone to lust and Jesuits are always followers of the path of God. The above quotation proves the point that the effort of Laforgue, the revered father to remain as a truthful Christian is a mere pretension.

Commonly it is agreed that colonized is influenced by the colonizer and the vice versa is impossible. Moreover, the colonized is shown as the dependent of the colonizer. The culture, behaviour and customs of the colonized are always portrayed to be inferior to the colonizer. In this novel, these commonly-agreed upon assumptions of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized are subverted. There are many French men who turned into a savage. They started to adapt themselves to the lifestyle of the savages and they are not interested to go back to their native place. Daniel, who accompanies father Laforgue, falls in love with a savage girl and even goes to the extent of changing himself into a tribe. Doumergue, the chief clerk mentions of the priest, Jean Mercier who has changed in to a savage. He tells his assistant that Jean Mercier dresses and even eats like the savage. He also informs his assistant that there are many out there

who will become like Mercier in five years. When the assistant asks how it is possible for one to live with the savage, Doumergue explains thus:

They live for their pleasure, for a full belly. They live to hunt and fish. They do not work, the Algonkin. And, most important, they let him fuck their young girls. He likes that. He likes to get away from the life the priests would have us live here, praying and fasting and all that. (21)

Baptism plays a major role in lives of the native people. The Jesuits portray that the native savages are in need of baptism. They also find fault with their religious system and their way of life. Jesuits make everybody believe that the savages are doomed and the only way for them to save themselves from their doomed existence is to follow Christianity. It is not to be understood that Jesuits' attempt to baptise the people is genuine and savages get baptised as they willingly submit to the beliefs of Christianity. This becomes true when one finds a priest in Huron baptises the people without caring whether they surrender their souls to God willingly. The responses of the savages to the baptism are mixed. The Jesuits baptise the savages after their death. If a savage seems to accept for baptism, it is because they believe that would cure the disease. This shows that the savages do not convert to Christianity out of any realisation or revelation. Rather, they are forced to convert out of their circumstances.

Brian Moore does not privilege one culture over other. According to him, the practices of Jesuits and their attempt to baptise the savages are the result of their misunderstanding of the native people of North America. The Jesuits use their religious system and customs to measure the standard of the savages. In this novel, Brian portrays the culture of the savages as unique and different from the French. So it is fruitless to compare the savages with the French and conclude that the former is a degraded one, whereas the latter is privileged one. The savages consider the Jesuits as sorcerers. The father Laforgue was taken to be the sorcerer as a result of the dream of Neehatin. The act of baptism is also treated as a practice of sorcery. This is why Neehatin and others decide to leave Laforgue behind. When Chomina dies, his daughter prevents Laforgue from baptising him as she feels that would hurt his father.

Brian Moore, instead of completely relying on the Relations, referred other works by anthropologists and historians for his portrayal of the native people of the North America. This

made his bring out the discrepancy in the works of the Jesuits. Unlike Julian Barnes, who sternly rejects the claim of attaining the past, Brian Moore seems to take up a position in his novel. This becomes clear when he says that he is doubly aware of the gripping and strange tragedy that occurred when the Indian belief in a world of night and in the power of dreams clashed with the Jesuits' preachments of Christianity and a paradise after death. Though Brian Moore consciously attempts to distort the history, yet one can infer from his novel in general and author's note in particular that there is a possibility of existence of different versions of truth.

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