

Politics of Irony in Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale*

Khadananda Prasai

Associate Professor, Shaheed Smriti Multiple Campus, Tandi, Chitwan.

Anita Paudel

Student, Nepal Open University, Kathmandu

Abstract

The Missionary: An Indian Tale is the expression of Sydney Owenson Morgan's tremendous insider knowledge of India as well as of her love and admiration for the country and its people. The novel embodies the ironic mode of storytelling that foregrounds the panoramic celebration of India, a magnificent picture of its landscapes, religious performance, culture and a fascinating depiction of characters named Luxima, an Indian prophetess and a Portuguese monk named Hilarion. He travels to India to spread Christianity with the mission of establishing the colony. The focus on this paper was to analyze how politics of irony had been used in the novel. To substantiate the paper, the researcher had taken help of Beerendra Pandey's article entitled "Radicalizing Irony" who claims that irony as "motor of the entire rhetorical system" (263) that creates "the gap between the said and unsaid" (266) in which the marginalized, repressed, colonized counters and invalidates the center. To accomplish this research article, Owenson's novel *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* had been used. Similarly, the researcher used "The Missionary Picturesque, 1790-1860" by Pramod K. Nayar, Michael J. Franklin's book "The Romantic Representations of British India" as the tools of analysis. The irony hidden in the texture quotes expose that Luxima, the representative of India and Hindu religion, is reckoned by her belongingness and devotion to her religious practice. The ironic representation of Hilarion undercuts his missionary purpose of converting her into Christianity.

Keywords: Radicalizing Irony, colonial violence, Eurocentric intellectual history, ironic representation.

Irony: Vehicle of Politics

Irony is characterized as the gap between saying and the actual meaning. It is a literary tool to convey the message distancing oneself in a literal way. It creates the layers of meaning and complexities to problematize the established values, norms, beliefs, and meaning. Irony deals with a verbal play in which the stated and unstated come together in a certain way in order to make real meaning. According to Linda Hutcheon, irony is different from metaphor or metonymy and it has an edge; unlike incongruity or

juxtaposition, irony can put people on edge; unlike paradox, irony is decidedly edgy. While it may come into being through the semantic playing off of the stated against the unstated, irony is a "weighted" mode of discourse in the sense that it is asymmetrical, unbalanced in favor of the silent and the unsaid (38). In this regard, irony is generally taken as the rhetorical trope where one articulates something to other; then; s/he actually means another as Booth regards irony as "says one thing and mean another" (21). Irony helps to understand not only the literal meaning but it also helps to unfold the hidden meaning of the text which is not given.

Owenson while ironizing the missionary's luxury of reasons; enthusiasm, has used irony as the vehicle of politics that Hilarion actually could not work in a reasonable way rather Luxima works more reasonable way (62). The locus from where Owenson is writing the novel, Hilarion becomes the center of irony that Hilarion's attempt of converting Luxima by his a radical element of self-proclaimed rationality and enthusiasm (28-29) has been confronted with Luxima's sensibility and devotion to God. Although Owenson's novel in the words of Michael J. Franklin is "representation of India in the novel was the product of significantly less labored research but considerably more emphatic insight into Hindu culture"(25), she here polishes the image of Luxima who demystifies Hilarion's imagination, perspective which "excite man to sow the seeds of great and distant events, to found empires, or to destroy them" (80). The novel reveals India as rude, wild war like (15), site of desire to power and control which is Owenson's own territorializing of her desire within colonial system with its basic concepts of control and domination.

The novel is not overt propaganda, and on the surface, what comes across above all else is Owenson's tremendous insider's knowledge of India and her love and admiration for the country and its people. While exposing such politics of irony in the novel, it foregrounds the perspective of the margin (Luxima) in a way that it deconstructs the views of the center in the official representation (Hilarion) and it questions on the validity of the official representation. Luxima embodies the Indian sublime, the unstructured, appealing ambiguity of the east and subverts Hilarion's implied colonial violence, stable western knowledge. Though Hilarion presents himself as the paternalistic rescuer of Luxima and the Hindus in general, his mission to convert Luxima, becomes afflicted with an excess of sensibility, a paralyzing mixture of anger, superiority, lust, and repression.

Eurocentric Intellectual History:

During the time of romantic period, physical colonization was in speed. Colonizers imposed the universal world view of history, religion culture etc. They were trying to universalize their model of colonizing mission. But they did not understand the reality that history, religion, culture was local. What they believed in that anything that did not fit into their framework/model was considered to be conservative, savage, barbarous.

In fact, the colonizers tried to justify them identifying the Indians as primitive and barbarous. They opined that they could make the Indians civilize by colonizing them. They were highly rooted into the thinking of negative sublimity of Indian culture and Hindu religion. Their notion was based on the taming \ domesticating India. Large numbers of travelers, missionaries wrote negatively about India because of their colonial ideology. In spite of this negative ideology also, Owenson wrote this novel with the positive representation of Hindu religion. The colonial mission in India was to convert the Hindus to Christians. Anybody who was not Christians was considered as a heathen.

As a literary device, irony is the use of words to convey a said meaning that is the opposite of its literal or unsaid meaning. It is the indirect presentation of a contradiction in expression and the context in which it occurs. Irony, in its use, emphasizes on the opposition between the literal and intended meaning of a statement; one thing is said and its opposite is implied. Similarly, Beerendra Pandey have further writes:

Irony, through which the Western world has propped up its images of self and as privileged home of reason, on the one hand, had remained a highly valorized trope in Eurocentric intellectual discourse for long time. It is through the elitist trope of irony that the Western discourse has attempted to take control of the ways in which the Western narratives produce the Western subjects and their other. Thus, deconstructive irony exposes the cognitive bias of the Eurocentric Western intellectual history by subverting it through its own authenticity (263).

Irony, as Pandey observes in the above quotes, creates the gap between said and unsaid and the deeper and unseen layer of significance is revealed not by the words themselves but the situation and the context in which they are occurred. The use of irony involves a subtle technique where by different levels of meaning are created. The writers have a specific purpose when they choose to use irony in this subtle sense. Instead of engaging the reader in a direct lecture, with the use of irony, they leave the readers to explore and ponder on the various levels of meaning and arrive at an understanding hinted by the writer. The colonial discourses have portrayed of Indian people and culture of India is essentially prejudiced. It is believed that the British rule has a utility as it helped in maintaining law and order. Without the Britishers, India would not have been able to escape savagery, illiteracy, poverty, famine. Elleke Boehmer argues:

Colonizers dismissed the local cultures as primitive; Europeans did not necessarily cancel the scripts and artefacts made by the colonized peoples. On the contrary, during the early days of administration in

areas such as India, South- East Asia, and the Middle East, colonizers often searched diligently for the non- European texts that would help them govern. In many cases too, textual borrowings took place with the co-operation of colonized subjects.... Through the medium of translation, so gaining command over a variety of texts, British administrators hoped to undermine the native monopoly on legal knowledge, and to gather the information needed to impose their own authority (19).

The reality of colonialism enters in the literary texts as the necessary background that makes possible their narratives of adventure and romance. The linking of colonialism with the genre of the romantic adventure story is also evident. While using Britain's colonial enterprise/mission as the setting of their narratives, the literary writers also participate in the construction and propagation of colonial ideology by providing an implicit justification for British imperialism. Colonialism, therefore, appears in these colonial narratives not only as the literal backdrop for the narrative action, but also as the ideological framework that provides the justification of their colonial mission. Hilarion in the novel in this context leaves for India to accomplish his missionary aspirations. Colonialism thus provides an expanded canvas even to the novels, which reveal the inextricable involvement of British society in the colonial enterprise. At the same time, the implicit presence of ideas such as the savage nature of natives and the white man's burden of bringing civilization to them also involves in the form of colonial ideology that provides the conceptual framework for colonialism.

Resistance against Colonizing Sensibility:

The irony in the novel gradually exposes with a missionary of Christianity as well as the representative voice of colonizers named Hilarion who claims that he is the man of reason, rationality. He considers India as the land of fools and barbarism. Therefore, he comes there to civilize the barbaric and fool Indians to civilize them through the process of Christianity. Similarly, he is also critical of the enthusiasm (26) of Luxima and justifies his superiority complex in the name of western missionary. It is the arrogant attitude of colonizing missionary who claims himself as a reasonable man (3) and the Indians are the emotional. In fact, it is his colonial mindset and he actually can't think and work in a reasonable way. He is proud of having luxury of reasoning. It is the ironic unsaid position that missionary's zeal of enthusiasm to convert Luxima into Christianity radically subversive at this position and her subjectivity is transferred towards him. Promod K.Nayar in "The Missionary Picturesque" writes, "The second moment reveals the missionary's plans to transforms India, to integrate non- Christian India into Christian world" (106). But the irony hits here at the core of the missionary who comes here to convert the Indians into Christianity begins to appreciate Luxima's enthusiasm at last. Thus irony has been used here as a powerful critique

of the missionary's "visions of holy illusion"(7) which subverts his notion of India's sensibility and to his enlightenment dogma (5).

At the moment that he was struck by the conviction, a light and rustling noise seemed to proceed from the summit of the mound. He drew back, and casting up his eyes, perceived Luxima descending amidst the trees. She came darting lightly forward, like an evening iris; no less brilliant in hue, no less rapid in descent. She passed without observing the Missionary, and her dark and flowing tresses left an odor on the air, which generated his sense. He had not the power to follow, nor to address her: he crossed himself, and prayed.... Thrice she bowed to the earth the brow irradiated with his beams, and then raising her hands to the west, while all the enthusiasm of a false, but ardent devotion sparkled in her upturned eye, and diffused itself over her seraphic countenance, she repeated the vesper worship of her religion (61-2).

The speaker in the above-mentioned extract is speaking in the typical narrative British voice of the colonial time. Perhaps it can be the surrogate voice of the novelist. Basically, Luxima who represents the India herself reveals the ironical representation of the missionary. On the one hand, it gives the impression about Hillarion as an enthusiastic person and Luxima as a fanatic woman (35). Hillarion claims that he is man of reason and enlightenment. But the irony critically exposes the fact that reason, enlightenment, enthusiasm can't go together. When he sees her, he is guided by religious enthusiasm, at the same time; he is also guided by her beauty. He is gazing on her body language from typical British eyes. Here, what we find is that there is gap between religious enthusiasm (61) and sexual enthusiasm (62) of the missionary. The irony lies here in his appearance and reality. There is contradiction in his narratorial and colonial eyes. Therefore, he is in self-delusion and his eyes try to prove her enthusiasm as false. The ironic edge goes on sharpening as Hillarion commands her for his intention:

"Daughter, in approaching thee I obey a will higher than thy command; I obey a Power, which bids me tell thee that the prejudice which thy mind submits is false alike to happiness and to reason; and that a religion which creates distinction between the species cannot be the religion of truth; for He who alike made thee and me knows no distinction: He who died to redeem my sins died also for thy salvation. Children of different religions, we are yet children of the same parent, created by the same Hand, and inheritors of the same immortality"(63).

Here, the narrator talks on the position of having typical colonizing mission. He argues that it is his duty to teach and protect the Indians through his mission. In other words, it is his paternalistic attitude or civilizing mission. So, he addresses her as

daughter. He justifies that her religious enthusiasm is false and to take her into the right path is his duty. This obviously displays the colonizing mission of the British Empire.

As Pandey states, "Irony is mostly produced by interpreters in a dynamic interplay of the said meaning with the unsaid one"(265), the missionary is conjuring up the Indian landscape as 'prymaeval mountains', 'rude', 'wild as the storms'(15) into his mind. It is his presupposition about India that it was the land of no civilization and they were living in the cities where as the Indians were living in the cave. The colonial ideology of the missionary in the novel has represented the Indian people as war like, rude, wild etc. Therefore, the irony in the novel turns out to be politically subversive to the center as it is directed at the subversion of the long-rooted western rhetoric that takes India as primitive and uncultured place. Hilarion's world view of India is resurfaced in the narrative where he is mesmerized by the beauty and refined religious practice of India. Hilarion is a fusion of imperialist; his experience of sublimity as he wants to convert the east and introduces him as a man who brings the material claims of imperialism with his vision of founding or destroy the empire. But the politics of irony is deconstructed with the exposition of biased Eurocentric worldview by subverting it through its own authenticity. The gap between the said and unsaid which creates the politics of irony is unequivocally apparent in the quotes:

The soul of the Missionary swelled in the contemplation of scenes so calculated to elevate the ideas, to inflame the imagination, and to recall the memory to those areas in time, to those event in human history, which stimulate, by their example, the powers of latent genius, rouse the dormant passions into actions, and excite man to sow the seeds of great and distant events, to found empires, or to destroy them (16).

In the above quote, the missionary's attitude reflects the ironic unsaid of what has been said. Here the missionary's sharp perceptions of India shifted from clear appreciation to extensive condemnation of Indian Hindu religious practices and customs. Endowed with the sense of superiority, he justified Western intellectual superiority to the Indians. He interpreted it as India's cultural and spiritual backwardness. He argues that it is his mission to civilize India and hold it as a trust until Indians prove themselves competent for self-rule. His imagination is here based on the notion of establishing the Empire or to dismantle it if he is unable to do so. Can the man of reason do this? He has the civilizing mission to India to be achieved by replacing the Hindu religious values with Christianity. "Daughter" he said, "health and peace to thee and thine! May the light of true religion effuse its luster o'er thy soul, as the light of the sun now irradiates thy form!" (82). He expects the light of true religion, i.e., Christianity would impress her so that she could able to convert herself into his religious practice. To the orthodox Christian, the true light means the physical light of the sun. But to Luxima, true light means the sun light which is regarded as the divine light. She is being

ironical indicates that she herself is the manifestation sun power and she is irradiated by that light. Luxima, being an enlightened one represents for India and she isn't an ordinary girl. She has all her virtues and she shows them in the sense of using her reasons. The said information of Hillarion in the novel ironically recalls the unsaid information of Luxima. Therefore, the irony in the novel turns out to be politically subversive as it is directed at the subversion of the long-rooted western ideology that Hindu religion has weakness, irrationality and lack of enthusiasm. The novel tries to correct the representation of Luxima as the devotee of enthusiasm (16), reason (33) and enlightenment (63) from the eyes of the missionary with the application of the politics of irony. The stereotypical image of Luxima as a timid girl (63) produces the irony that it is used in the negative way. But the timidity implies here a sharp irony that it exposes the good character of her with proper use of reason and enthusiasm. The "elitist trope irony", (Pandey 263) has taken control over Luxima's character as timid girl which ultimately subverts the cognitive bias of the Eurocentric Western intellectual history.

Conclusion :

The ironical representation of her embodies both emotions and reasons and Hillarion, his pride of being rational, enlightened and reasonable but he lacks all of these virtues. He boasts on his performance that he is doing his task very conscious way. But he suffers from the unconscious mind that he is unable to distinguish which one is rational and irrational act. Can a rational, enlightened man display such character? She is not Christian but holds the view that his God is also hers. Here, the novelist precisely ironizes the missionary's ideology of looking at the Hindu religion by justifying his mission of converting it into Christianity. The irony used in the novel underwrites the irrationality, enthusiasm inherent in Hillarion that has kept him in the veil of blindness to Hindu religion and India. The irony hidden in the texture quotes expose that Luxima, the representative of India and Hindu religion, is reckoned by her belongingness and devotion to her religious practice. The ironic representation of Hillarion undercuts his missionary purpose of converting her into Christianity.

By and large, westerners are negative towards Indian culture, Hindu religion. It is the stereotypical cultural practice of the colonizers. Though the novelist belongs to that group, she has not shown the cultural superiority of Christianity rather she has valorized the Hindu religious practices in an ironical way that it is more than three thousand years old when the colonizers were in the cave. She ironically intends to say that India is culturally, religiously superior to the British Missionaries. She has not distorted the Indian culture and it cannot be represented in the "colonial rhetoric" and it is highly wrong to think that Hindu religion is uncultured. Owenson is different from

the typical of colonial rhetoric.

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