

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN POSTMODERN FICTION

ABSTRACT

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RAJESHBHAI K. BHARVAD

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PROFESSOR M. F. SALAT



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

FACULTY OF ARTS

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Abstract

Narrative Strategies in Postmodern Fiction

Fiction is a genre that normally depicts the contemporary culture and creative consciousness of the specific era. Postmodern fiction embraces cultural consciousness as well as prevailing literary and philosophical tendencies. Bakhtin points out in *The Dialogic Imagination* that the world has become polyglot and the novel actively creates polyglot world – something that is quite opposed to the previous tendencies in all the genres as they used to represent “eras of closed and deaf monoglossia” (12). As he further says, “In contrast to other major genres, the novel emerged and matured precisely when intense activation of external and internal polyglossia was at its peak of its activity; this is its native element” (12). If postmodern culture is observed, it is noted that the postmodern world is fraught with the horrors of the world wars, inundated with technology and products of mass consumption, and affected by the manipulative power of mass media.

Postmodern theorists show that the present postmodern phenomenon is a cultural product and an outcome of late capitalism, and its driving elements are bourgeois hegemony and the development of mass culture. It is culture specific; it grows out of a specific culture and evolves into new directions in other cultures of the world. Postmodern negation of the conventional binaries such as fact and fiction, day and night, and right and wrong, for instance, stimulates the development of magic realism first in Latin America and subsequently other cultures of the world. Different cultures adapt such narrative strategies from the perspective of their local needs.

Postmodern fiction with ‘kaleidoscopic’ plurality evolves out of mass culture and deconstructs notions of history. The ‘well-wrought urn’ unity and totality from the

perspective of culture, literature, art, and history are both present and absent in the 'double voiced' postmodern politics. Totality and unity are subsumed to be defied endlessly in the process. The metanarratives of history, society, literature, and art are questioned and subverted by the postmodern thinkers. Postmodern fiction, similarly, finds alternative versions in multiple mininarratives. The ironical fragmentation is celebrated in multiple ways. The fiction devoid of center plays with peripheries and indulges into multiple threads rather than adhering to one final center. This decentered fiction diverges into several forays generating endless narrative possibilities.

Postmodernism, with its pluralism and multiplicity, allows the writers to create fictions with multiple narrative patterns. With a view to deconstructing the existing fixities and finalities in the fiction, the postmodern writers create multiple narrative styles of representation. In fictions, the writers flout the unities and create different possible ways of narrating the stories. History, in postmodern fiction, becomes a subject of postmodern narrative play. Postmodernism accepts history and acknowledges its existence and relevance in the present context, but it questions the metanarrative of its supremacy, authenticity, and objectivity. In fictions, writers like Fowles, Marquez, Doctorow, and many others narrativize history and diminish the distinction between fact and fiction, or history and fiction. They question and subvert the objectivity and transparency in the historical representations. In fact, they subvert the very difference between the historical texts and the fictions by considering them as acts of narrative, and hence, the rules of narrative equally apply to both historical documents and the fiction. Along with this historical narrativization, postmodern writers to deconstruct the past also utilize parodical inversions of the past. The play of parody revisits both social and literary history. Unlike the conventional parody, postmodern parody increases its scope and encompasses a wide range of areas that include the literary works, historical incidents, and the form of the art

itself. Postmodern parody, unlike the conventional parody, assumes the nature of ‘double-voicedness’ that both inscribes the past and subverts it by ironizing it. In the play of these parodical inversions, irony becomes its chief weapon to deconstruct the past.

Apart from the above mentioned narrative strategies, magic realism, Bakhtinian Carnavalesque and heteroglossia, and the problem of representation are the other major areas that are explored by postmodern writers. Magic realism, which reduces the distinction between the real and the magical and repudiates all the binaries by creating a chaos in which the binaries assume the opposite characteristics of each other, corresponds with the carnivalesque and the heteroglossia. Magic realism becomes a significant tool for postmodern writers to subvert the metanarratives and propound plurality in fictions. The heteroglossia becomes a natural environment in the polyphonic postmodern novels. Postmodern plurality and its ‘double voiced’ nature create a suitable platform for Bakhtinian heteroglossia. Further, magic realism, too, becomes a suitable site for the carnivalesque to flourish, and postmodern writers aptly explore the possibilities of a combination of the two. Their corresponding nature enhances their coexistence, as can be seen in the major magic realist fictions such as *What the Crow Said*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Nights at the Circus* and many others.

Postmodern writers explore metafictional elements heavily within the creation of fiction. Metafiction can be expressed not only through direct addressing a reader, but also through other means such as quotation, allusion, false quotation, paraphrasing, parody, pastiche, irony, and intertextuality. All these devices point out a certain connection between a literary text, a reader, other works of art, documents, historical records, and theories. One of the most important aspects of a postmodern literary work, closely connected to metafiction, is intertextuality. Broadly speaking, intertextuality is a term coined by a Bulgarian/French theorist Julia Kristeva, who expresses a connection between the texts

through various devices and techniques. It is not a single mechanical connection, but rather a creative transformation of the referred texts in different linguistic and cultural contexts.

In postmodern fiction, “what is both instated and then subverted is the notion of the work of art as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object deriving its unity from the formal interrelations of its parts. Postmodernism both asserts and then undercuts this view, in its characteristic attempt to retain aesthetic autonomy while still returning the text to the “world” (Poetics of Postmodernism 125). The world does not suggest the common reality of the world, but the world of texts and intertexts. This world has direct links to the world of empirical reality, but it does not possess the authenticity pertaining to empirical reality. It is a contemporary critical truism that posits realism as a set of conventions, that representation of the real is not the same as the real itself. Historiographic metafiction challenges both naive realist concept of representation and naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world.

To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it. Postmodern parody not only enables the reader to recognize the textual traces of the past, but also it enables the reader to be aware of those traces through irony. The reader is forced to acknowledge not only the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the past, but also the value and the limitation of the inescapably discursive form of that knowledge. The parodic representation can be found in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* in which Calvino parodically represents the past. The case of Marco Polo, as shown by Calvino, proves the point of historical complexities through the play of subjective narrative style and unverifiable available textual sources. Certainly, Calvino parodically takes his frame-tale, his travel plot, and his characterization from *IL Milione*. Many postmodern novelists and critics such as Umberto Eco and Barthes have said that

intertextuality is an inevitable task wherein stories must tell the stories already told by different writers, and books must tell about the other books.

It is strikingly different from the realist reference in its explicit assertion of that relative inaccessibility of any reality that might exist objectively and prior to our knowledge of it. Here, fiction points out the problematic nature of language and the inaccurate system of historical knowledge. Postmodern historiographic metafiction attempts to accept the reality of the past and points out a teasing nature of that reality that it is accessible though the available discourses and it just questions how we know about that reality. The problem of reference is complicated in historiographic metafiction as it presents a somewhat overtly fictive world and complicates it with the addition of the historical traces.

The problem of reference is further complicated by the adaptation of post-structuralist views of language in fictions. Derrida's denial of the external reference that there is nothing outside the text does not imply that there is no meaning outside the text. He meant to question the accessibility of the external meaning to us in terms of signification. He said that meaning could only be derived within the text through deferral or *différance*. This post-structuralist thinking is adapted in the historiographic metafiction in which it questions the nature of the archive, document, or evidence. Historiographic metafiction restores the signified through its metafictional self-reflexivity about the function and process of meaning generation and at the same time ensures that the referent does not disappear. The fiction focuses on the complicated relationship between language and reality. Coetzee's *Foe* discusses the same point. Through Crusoe's tongueless Friday he presents this linguistic dilemma of language and representation of reality. His inability to speak anything represents a problem of language and reference. The novel also discusses about the nature and function of linguistic reference and manages to problematize even

further the entire novel's relation to fictive, intertextual, and political reality. At times, the postmodern writers play with the idea of reality and confuse the term with the other forms of realities. Burroughs mingles fiction, fantasy, dreams, and hallucinations and plays with their subtleties by dislodging the differences between them. In Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch*, it is difficult to distinguish between realities, dreams, fantasies, and hallucinations of a drug addict. In this novel, drug addicts' fantasies stand as a metaphor for the general human condition in the postmodern period, which is understood not as clear, identifiable as in a realistic novel, or as subjectively perceived and reflected in the human mind, but as chaotic, entropic, paranoiac and difficult not only to comprehend but also to respond to.

Postmodern narrative strategies are not limited to the aforementioned ones, since postmodern plurality allows the scope of endless possibilities. In fact, postmodernism cannot be limited to any number of narrative strategies. Postmodern plural self generates multiple threads of narrative strategies in various cultures of the world. Its inclusiveness and pluralism enables it to be accepted by the writers of the world. This is the reason why postmodern narrative patterns are always in multiplicity, and can never to be limited to specificity and finality. Different cultural contextualization allows the writers to produce fictions with multiple different narrative strategies. For instance, Japanese, American, Indian, African, and Canadian writers narrate the problem/question of representation differently. The present study will focus on major postmodern narrative strategies that have wider influence on postmodern writings.

My thesis, entitled, "Narrative Strategies in Postmodern Fiction", examines various narrative directions that emerge in the postmodern era. There are five chapters in the thesis based on dominant postmodern narrative strategies. Except the first chapter, which focuses on the emergence of postmodern fiction, the other four chapters focus on various

dominant narrative strategies. Each chapter is allotted one central book in which a particular narrative strategy is examined. Apart from the detailed study of the central book, many other postmodern texts from various authors are also scrutinized to support the argument of a particular chapter. All these narrative strategies are interlinked and carry similar postmodern purposes. This inter-relationship is also shown in all the chapters while focusing on any dominant narrative strategy.

In the first chapter, “Postmodernist Narrative: Text and Context”, the key introductory aspects of postmodernism and their major roots are discussed. Postmodern narrative techniques are the resultant factors of predominant cultural and theoretical changes that take place in the postmodern era. The disruption of cultural norms that exist due to technological advancement and the horrors of two wars change the entire scenario of postmodern thought and because of that, philosophers, cultural critics, and linguists posit revolutionary theories in terms of culture, language, and philosophy. Postmodern thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Lyotard, and Baudrillard express the mood of the cultural context and change all the modernist preoccupations negating their conventionalities.

The narrative strategies are explored with their inseparable connection with the theoretical and cultural background of the era. Various postmodern authors and their works are studied and the narrative techniques utilized by the respective writers are presented in this chapter. Narrativized history, referential problems of language, deformed form, deconstructed realism in magic realism, parodical intertextuality, Bakhtinian carnivalesque and heteroglossia, and an ironical self-reflexivity are found in postmodern fictions irrespective of their being in various cultural and regional locations. The approaches and narrative tendencies carried out by the writers are different from one another. Postmodern fictions in Latin America, America, Italy, and Canada differ with

respect to their approaches but narrate the same decentered world. In this chapter, postmodern narrative tendencies are foregrounded historically, culturally and theoretically as history, culture, postmodern theories, and fiction inescapably correspond with each other.

In the second chapter, “History as/and Fiction”, the relationship between history and postmodern fiction is explored. The study displays the blurring of conventional boundaries between history and fiction, and exposes the inherent narrativity among them. Taking an explicit route to history, postmodern fiction includes historical data and personages in the framework of fiction. These historical explorations, however, are not simple in any way as they are full of contradictions and paradoxes. Postmodern revisit to history is not nostalgic but ironic. It does not depict history as a kind of authentic representation of historical reality but problematizes the entire notion of historicity.

In this chapter, E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* is explored with this postmodern idea of historicity. Both history and fiction mingle and become a process of narrativity. Doctorow offers an alternative and a fictional version of twentieth century American history. Historical figures in connection with fictional characters are assigned both historical and fictional roles. The process mingles fiction and history inseparably. Historical figures like Evelyn Nesbit, Harry Houdini, Henry Ford and others are shown in fabricated association with fictional characters such as the Younger Brother, Father, Coalhouse Walker and others.

History is narrativized in such a way that fact and events presented can no longer be verified. The notions regarding authenticity and objectivity are questioned and subverted in the process of narrativization/fictionalization of history. The narrativized and fictionalized history of the historical figures such as Houdini and Nesbit suggests the

postmodern phenomenon in which the personal lives of Houdini and Nesbit are narrativized. The writer, in fact, ironizes the historical figures instead of the conventional way of glorifying them and subverts the glorified and recorded versions of history. The writer does not deny the existence of history, but he questions the authenticity of the recorded/textualized history.

Apart from this, other novels such as *The Name of the Rose*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Public Burning*, *Immortality*, *The White Hotel* and many other postmodern novels suggest the postmodern viewpoint of history. History is visited by postmodern writers but with a tinge of irony. Postmodernism usually contests the reliability of the past as the past is available through human constructs/textuality. Fictionalization of historical characters and surrounding them with fictional events and fictional characters suggests their intensified questioning of the past or history.

In the third chapter, “Con/fusion of Magic Realism and Bakhtinian Carnavalesque”, magic realism and Bakhtinian carnivalesque spirit are shown together as complimenting and corresponding with each other in the act of subversion in Robert Kroetsch’s *What the Crow Said*. Magic realism as an essential narrative strategy of postmodern fiction flourished in Latin America and then spread across the globe as an effective subversive tool. It plays a vital role in fiction along with the carnivalesque spirit to dismantle authenticity and norms of the society.

Like magic realism, which blurs all the binaries, carnivalesque spirit, too, with its liberating spirit, associates itself in the act of questioning all the conventions, norms, and prevailing forces of the society. Magic realism creates an atmosphere where magical becomes real and real becomes magical. Carnavalesque spirit, similarly, generates both subversive and liberating spirit and their fusion creates an altogether different world filled

with magical elements as well as liberating spirit. This con/fusion is studied in detail in Kroetsch's novel. The opening chapter of the book presents magical copulation between Vera Lang and the bees. The very act is both magical and suggestive of carnivalesque spirit. The narrator rightly says, "People years later, blamed everything on the bees; it was the bees, they said, seducing Vera Lang, that started everything" (1). Representation of lower body strata is one of the focuses of carnivalesque practices. Body and its bawdy functions such as copulation, which are considered as taboo in the conventional officialdom, are celebrated in carnivalesque practices.

The fusion of carnivalesque and magic realism cause conflicting multiple voices in the novel. This in turn invokes heteroglossia and its subsequent dialogism. Carnivalesque, a social theory propounded by Bakhtin, has been utilized in both novelistic form and content through the liberating spirit that allows the writer to distort and question all the social as well as novelistic norms. Representation of his theories is seen in the novel that replaces conventional monoglossia with polyglossia. Both, subversiveness and plurality, found in Bakhtinian theories, compliment postmodernist narrative multiplicity.

It is this similarity and corroboration in both magic realism and carnivalesque that carnival becomes a natural setting in Kroetsch's novel: subversive nature, and eradication of the arch binaries such as the real and the magical, the center and the margin, the popular and the literary, the officialdom and the marketplace, the spiritual and the lower body stratum, morality and immorality, and life and death. The con/fusion transgresses all the conventional boundaries, whether social or literary.

The case of such fusion is prevalent in postmodern books. Postmodern works of various authors such as Marquez, Carter, Rushdie, and Llosa are fraught with this fusion of magic realism and carnivalesque to subvert the metanarratives, and to repudiate the notions of

realism and objectivity. Writers from different continents such as Japan, America, Latin America, Canada, Italy, and Argentina utilize this narrative strategy for their local purposes.

In the fourth chapter, “Language, Form and the Question of Representation”, the problem of representation is discussed. Form and language, instead of being supportive and transparent in terms of representation, become obstacles. Both the new linguistic theories and simultaneous deconstruction of center have caused this phenomenon.

With the advent of structuralism, language becomes a center of study in all the relevant fields. The concept revolutionizes the notion of conventional usage of language wherein Saussure posits that meaning is generated through the differential aspects of the signs and not through the etymological concepts. This play of signs in the meaning generation reaches new levels when post-structuralists such as Derrida, Foucault, and others as well as philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Rorty deny this concept of sign leading to the meaning through signifiers and state that sign might simply lead to yet another sign and the ultimate meaning might not be gained as sign does not lead to the ‘final signified’ as Derrida mentioned but simply to more signs. Form, like language, ceases to be reliable and authentic. Instead of becoming a reliable tool of representation for the writers, it proves to be a block that resists any kind of objective and authentic knowledge. Both language and form work together in postmodern fictions to stall/resist/deconstruct/defy representation.

In the chapter, this postmodern stance of language and the formless form is studied in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. It is a good example that narrates the problem of representation. Calvino deconstructs the myth of transparent language and form as a reliable tool for representation. In the deconstructive process of representation, Calvino

questions both the branches of epistemology and ontology. He presents multiple narratives simultaneously working together to resist both the notion of representation as well as the temptation of interpretation. The reader becomes complicit in the process of writing a text whose very modus operandi emphasizes that there are no beginnings or ends in the narrative, that all texts come from other texts, and that all words come from other words.

The other postmodern writers such as Pynchon, Fowles, Kroetsch, Barth, Auster, Rushdie, and Carter narrate the problem of representation in the same way as Calvino has done in the present novel. Except that the purposes of these authors that vary, the narrative techniques utilized by the writers fall in the same direction. The closure or the end is mocked at, parodied, and negated by the postmodern writers.

It is found that while language ceases to be a transparent material for representation, form assumes alternative qualities such as deviating from the unity or merging multiple genres and the like. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* the phenomenon is presented by either deconstructing the unity of a particular genre or mixing multiple genres at the same time. The novel in the beginning seems to be a detective story that suddenly changes into multiple genres as it progresses. It turns into a diary, an erotic story, epistolary tale, and a magic realist story. Paul Auster in *Invisible* presents multiple points of view and breaks away from the unity by diverging into multiple genres such as an essay, letter, biography, poem, or non-fiction.

This blurring of the form not only defies the unity of the novelistic form and closure, but also defies the possibility of stable and reliable representation. In the process of blocking simple and direct or authentic narration, the writers question the very possibility of genuine authenticity, originality and sometimes blur the distinction between original and

fake or the plagiarized. The narrator in Calvino's novel points out on numerous occasions this phenomenon. He questions/fractures the entire process of the creation of novel and its publication. He diminishes the distinction between genuine creation, translated work, and plagiarized work. Marana, a fictional writer, translator, and plagiarizer, is shown to be publishing novels under his name and complicates the difference between the original and the fake.

In the fifth chapter, "Parody, Irony, and the Act of Subversion", John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is examined to discover the role of both irony and parody in the act of subversion. The novel parodies the Victorian Period in terms of its literary field, social conventions, and historical notions. Fowles parodies the realistic conventions of representation and through irony subverts it. The writer parodies the styles of major Victorian novelists such as Charles Dickens and William Thackeray, thinkers such as Arnold and Carlyle, and poets such as Robert Browning and Lord Tennyson. He, simultaneously, parodies the entire society and its parochialism in the fiction.

With multiple voices being employed in the novel, the novel becomes an example of Bakhtinian heteroglossia. Multiple voicing, parodical and ironical inversion of the past and plurality of form add to the Bakhtinian phenomenon. The conflicting voices are suggestive of polyglossia that enhances postmodern multiplicity and plurality in terms of both form and content.

Parody is a popular form in the postmodern era with the help of which authors both install various styles, works, or history in their works and subvert the same in the process of narration. D M Thomas in his *The White Hotel* parodies the entire branch of psychoanalysis in the case study narrated by the writer. He simultaneously parodies the holocaust as well. Barth in his *The Sot-Weed Factor* parodies the styles of Henry Fielding,

Lawrence Stern, and Tobias Smollet. Robert Kroetsch in his *The Studhorse Man* parodies the convention of representing objective reality in biography and goes on to question the entire notion of realism and its nature of unbiased objectivity. Postmodern parody becomes an essential tool for this 'double voicing' act of both using and abusing, installing and subverting the prevailing canons of both past and present.

Postmodernism with its disruptive and subversive nature assumes a quality of infiniteness in its journey of deconstruction. It is a process without fixed beginning or no fixed end. Unlike any other age in the history of English literature postmodern is and will remain a controversial material, as it does not believe in fixities and is inescapably inclined to questioning. This ceaseless questioning is the only thing that remains permanent in postmodernism. Critics like Josh Toth have suggested the end of the contentious era, but with postmodernism taking multiple routes and encompassing endless multiplicity, it is unlikely to resort to any stasis whatsoever.

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