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ART OF NARRATION: A STUDY OF JOHN BARTH'S "LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE"

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Abstract: Narratives forms a part of the history of mankind from early times and is a central concern in different civilizations in diverse forms. The study of the structure of narratives becomes relevant with the advent of theories such as structuralism, post structuralism, postmodernism and so forth. Postmodernism as a literary movement challenges the traditional approaches and question the notion of reality. It explores fragmentariness in plot, character conception, perspective, style of narration and so on. By foregrounding the fictional aspects of the text, the postmodern narratives make clear the artificiality of the literary text. "Lost in the Funhouse", a short story by John Barth, subverts all the conventional styles of narration and emerges as a prototype of postmodern experimental fiction.

Keywords: Postmodernism, metafiction, fragmentation, self-reflexivity, intertextuality.

Postmodernism can be defined as the style of literature that emerged during the chaotic political, social and cultural environment of the 1960s. The postmodernists differ from the early realist and modernist writers as they challenged the existing conventions of writing. The postmodernist literature is noted for characteristics such as self-reflexivity, authorial intrusion, presence of metafictional elements, unreliable narrators, fragmented and distorted characters, non-linear narration and so forth. This experimentation in fictional narration reached its peak in the writings of authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, John Simmons Barth and so forth.

The works of these writers depict kind of subjective exploration of consciousness by turning away from external reality. It is their belief in the un surmountable existential crisis that results in the fragmentariness of narrative and character conception. Unlike the modernist writers who anticipate the resolution of this crisis, the postmodernists believe that the only way out of this predicament is to play within the chaos. The postmodern writing that redefined the 'novel' as a literary genre, rose to prominence with the publication of works like

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Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut, *Lost in the Funhouse* by John Barth, *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon and many others.

“Lost in the Funhouse” appears as a short story in John Barth’s book of the same title. This story exemplifies postmodern characteristics such as constant shift in perspective, meta narration, self-reflexivity and so on by its subversion of linearity in narration. “Lost in the Funhouse” presents the story of a sensitive teenage boy named Ambrose who goes on a trip to Maryland with his parents, brother, uncle Karl and a girl named Magda. Though Ambrose likes the girl, he is not courageous enough to confess his love to her. Later, Ambrose, Peter and Magda enter the funhouse. Though Ambrose plans to propose Magda inside the funhouse, she goes away with Peter, leaving Ambrose within the darkness of the funhouse. The rest of the narrative explores the inner conflicts of Ambrose caused by his powerlessness to express his feelings as well as his inability to escape from the funhouse.

The journey of Ambrose and his family to the Ocean City, Maryland forms only a part of the story. The greater part is mostly about the thoughts and feelings of Ambrose caught up inside the funhouse. The story is recounted from the perspective of a third person narrator who comments on their journey as well as the structural and stylistic aspects of the work. The narrator’s intrusion and his comments highlight the postmodern notion that a literary text is an *objet d’art*. Barth points out that through this authorial intrusion, “...it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means” (73).

The shift in the point of view in narration forms an important narrative strategy employed by the author to highlight the artificiality of the literary text. At the beginning, “Lost in the Funhouse” is recounted from the perspective of a third person narrator. Later it shifts to the perspective of the author and even later it is narrated from the perspective of Ambrose, the protagonist. The story also employs stream of conscious technique, where the thoughts of Ambrose, caught up inside the funhouse, contributes to the overall development of the story.

Barth describes the way Ambrose receives self-knowledge from the mirror room inside the funhouse: “Stepping from the treacherous passage at last into the mirror-maze, he saw how readily he deceived himself into supposing he was a person. He even foresaw, wincing at his dreadful self-knowledge, that he would repeat the deception, at ever-rarer intervals, all his wretched life, so fearful were the alternatives” (93).

The story focusses mainly on the narrative strategies employed in its development rather than its plot. Though the plot is simple on its surface level, the strategies that the author

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employs makes it a complicated one. As Patricia Waugh remarks, “Postmodernism can be seen to exhibit the same sense of crisis and loss of belief in an external authoritative system of order as that which prompted modernism. Both affirm the constructive powers of the mind in the face of apparent phenomenal chaos” (21). This loss of belief in a system of order complicates this story too. The main plot of the story includes the journey of Ambrose and his family to the funhouse, Peter’s and Ambrose’s affection for Magda, the difficulty faced by Ambrose to convey his love, their decision to enter the funhouse, self-realization of Ambrose, difficulty of the protagonist to find a way out of the funhouse and finally, their journey back to home. This chronology of events is disrupted by the author’s comments on the stylistics of the narrative, shifting perspectives and so forth. At one instance in the story, Barth himself comments on its fragmented and distorted plot as: “...the plot doesn’t rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires. The climax of the story must be its protagonist’s discovery of a way to get through the funhouse. But he has found none, may have ceased to search” (96).

Barth explains the interminable digressions in the plot structure of “Lost in the Funhouse” with the help of a conventional Freitag’s Triangle, where there is an exposition, introduction of conflict and climax for a narrative. Barth rejects this established mode and adopts a new experimental method where he intrudes and comments on the actions of characters in the story. These authorial intrusions hinder the easy flow of the narrative and create deviations. An instance of authorial intrusion in the story is where the “deliberate calm and adult gravity” (72) as expressed by Ambrose to impress Magda is mocked by the author, who intervenes and comments on Ambrose’s action: “Talking soberly of unimportant and irrelevant matters and listening consciously to the sound of your own voice are usual habits for maintaining control in this difficult situation” (72).

The postmodern writers focus mainly on the “theoretical issues concerning the writing of fiction” (Waugh 2). Being an experimental writer, Barth introduces an element of playfulness in the way he begins the story. Unlike the early narratives that begin with the typical ‘Once upon a time’, “Lost in the Funhouse” begins with a question “For who is the funhouse fun?” (72). It is through an answer to this question- “For Ambrose, it is a *place of fear and confusion*” (72) that the protagonist in the story is introduced.

In Barth’s view, “Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction” (73-74). The postmodern narratives differ from these standard notions and are highly inventive in their treatment of

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characters. As Waugh points out, “Throughout many metafictional novels, characters suddenly realize that they do not exist, cannot die, have never been born, cannot act” (91). In this story, Barth adopts a new method whereby the characters are plainly introduced without much description. The way Barth introduces the protagonist of this story illustrates this: “Ambrose was “at that awkward age. His voice came out high-pitched as a child’s if he let himself get carried away; to be on the safe side, therefore he moved and spoke with *deliberate calm and adult gravity*” (72). Similarly, the other characters are also introduced in an indifferent way. The only description about Ambrose’s mother is that she is ‘pretty’. About his father, the author says, “The boy’s father is difficult to describe; no particular feature of his appearance or manner stood out. He wore glasses and was principal of a T---Country grade school.

The postmodern writers gives emphasis to form rather than the content. The experimental novelists focusses their attention on the activity of writing. In this story too, Barth foregrounds the style of writing rather than the subject matter. At the beginning of the story, Barth gives a detailed description on the italicization of passages soon after the statement, “...*the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America*” (72) printed in italics. Barth remarks, “Italics are also employed, in fiction stories, especially, for “outside,” intrusive, or artificial voices, such as radio announcements, the texts of telegrams and newspaper articles, etcetera. They should be used sparingly” (72). Through self-reflexive techniques like this, the postmodern writers subverts the narrative development. In Waugh’s view, “...such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (2).

In Waugh’s view, most of the postmodern fictional narratives employ features such as self-reflexivity and formal uncertainty, and thereby draws attention to its own status as an artefact. They overlook the idea of illusion and are self-conscious about the act of writing. There is an instance in the story where Barth employs blanks in place of names of persons, places and so forth as in “Magda G---, aged fourteen, a pretty girl an exquisite young lady, who lived not far from them on B-----Street...” (72-73). On the use of this narrative technique Barth himself claims: “ Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality....it is an illusion that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means” (73). It thus questions the relationship between fiction and reality.

In Waugh’s view, the postmodernists believe in the ephemeral nature of reality. They “...reject the forms that correspond to this ordered reality (the well-made plot, chronological

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sequence, the authoritative omniscient author, the rational connection between what characters ‘do’ and what they ‘are’, the causal connection between ‘surface’ details and the ‘deep’, ‘scientific laws’ of existence)” (7). To establish the deviation of this story from the normal standards of narratives, Barth states:

The function of the *beginning* of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action, expose the background of the situation....and initiate the first complication or whatever of the “rising action.” Actually, if one imagines a story called... “Lost in the Funhouse,” the details of the drive to the Ocean City don’t seem especially relevant....So far there’s been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a theme. (77)

Intertextuality as a postmodern narrative strategy is a central concern in “Lost in the Funhouse”. Roland Barthes defines the concept of ‘intertext’ as “the impossibility of living outside the infinite text” (36). Intertextual references provides greater depth and significance to a literary text. As Julia Kristeva points out, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66). In this story too, Barth refers to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in his discussion of the ‘mixing of senses’. At one point in the story, Barth states: “It is also important to “keep the senses operating”; when a detail from one of the five senses, say visual, is “crossed” with a detail from another, say auditory, the reader’s imagination is oriented to the scene, perhaps unconsciously” (74). To illustrate this, Barth compares the glow of brown hair on Ambrose’s mother’s forearm in sunshine (visual), the smell of Uncle Karl’s cigar smoke (olfactory), the sound of the breakers (auditory) to James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, where he “uses the adjectives *snot-green* and *scrotum-tightening* to describe the sea” (74). Through links like this, Barth attempts to add depth to the text and heighten the notion that the literary work is an impersonal artifact.

The postmodern narratives offer a new stance on the nature of fictional practice. With its unending digressions and exposition of fictional strategies, these works evade acceptable conclusions and thereby disrupts the anticipations of the readers. Instead of a single ending of the story, here Barth discusses several possible endings: “One possible ending would be to have Ambrose come across another lost person in the dark. They’d match their wits together against the funhouse...help and encourage each other...if it were a girl, they’d know each other’s inmost souls, be bound together *by the cement of shared adventure*, then they’d emerge into the light and it would turn out that his friend was a Negro. A blind girl, President Roosevelt’s son. Ambrose’s former archenemy” (87).

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The alternative endings and the absence of an expected resolution are characteristic features of postmodern narratives. By introducing these features into this story, Barth tries to make his readers enter a mirror-maze of language and expects them to find a way out through their own interpretation of the story. Towards the end of the narrative, Ambrose decides to become the “secret-operator” (97) of the funhouse, as he understands the way it works. Similarly Barth makes his readers understand the act of writing fiction through these narrative techniques. Just like Ambrose, Barth wants his readers to re-read the story and come out with multiple interpretations.

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