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Structures of Reality: Postmodernist Fiction and Reality

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Abstract

This paper tries to deal with the shifting terrain and changing concept of reality beginning from its formative stage in the 18th century till date. The postmodern novelists like William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut jr. and many others mainly focus on narrative displacement. The linear narrative strategy is replaced with a disjointed and disruptive articulation that underpins the destabilized, uncertain, ponderous subjectivities of the characters. Such a realization has allowed a polyphonic possibility, resulting in a schizoid representation of the individual and society. The very conceptualization and narrativization of reality has resulted in a playful irrealism. These novelists engage themselves in an antifoundational exercise in articulating human experience in a world of shifting terrains where real is irreal and truth is relativized.

Keywords: Reality, Postmodernist, Genre, Hyperreality, Unreal, Construct, Antifoundational.

The novel emerged in the seventeenth century Europe as a part of literature. Since then the novel has engaged itself in search of reality. The novel aims at portraying reality. But the question that comes to our mind is after all what is reality? Reality according to Philosophy means the sum total of things that exist, or what would be included in a complete description of all the facts about the world. The term reality in fiction has been explained and described by many from different positions and perspectives. And the concept of reality is not fixed and stable. In this context, we can quote Gobinda Prasad Sarma who maintains:

> The concept of reality is changing from age to age. And accordingly, the novel that wants to reflect it is also changing its form. The modernist movement in Europe of the first four decades of the twentieth century was an immediate reaction against the over dependence of the preceding naturalistic movement on science or scientific precision in literature. Indeed, it was a reaction against the long dependence on the certainty inherent in the Cartesian concept of reality.

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> The sense of incertitude was basic to the modernist movement. We see that even with the passage of modernist movement into postmodernist movement, the sense of incertitude or uncertainty does not change. (Sharma 75)

We can further quote Gobinda Prasad Sharma who remarks:

> As the modernist movement wore on towards the forties, the principle of uncertainty in knowledge, however, did not suffer the same fate. On the contrary, it got more importance with Heisenburg proving in the laboratory of Science that we can never determine for certain both the position and the momentum of a sub-atomic particle simultaneously. The observer's presence itself changes the observed particle. Thus during the postmodernist movement also, the basic idea of modernism got emphasized- if Science itself cannot believe in precision, how can humanities aspire for certainty in knowledge? The postmodernist novelists also believed in this way that since nothing can be seen for certain, reality cannot also be perceived clearly- far less described or reflected objectively. The novel can never be a mirror for reality. It can only be a discourse for it (Sharma 75).

The postmodernist theorists like Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Jean Baudrillard and others believed that reality was not something that was given to us. Rather it was constructed or created. Jean Baudrillard is of the opinion that there is nothing which is called the real. His name is usually associated with what is normally called the 'loss of the real' and 'simulation'. He feels that it is the result of the scenes from television, film and advertisement that has eroded the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion and surface and depth. And this has led to a culture of 'hyperreality'. Here we can refer to Niall Lucy who in his book *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* writes:

> Baudrillard's argument is that reality no longer appears as such, but rather has become its appearances. Social knowledge nevertheless continues to be based on the reality (or the presence) of the real, because the function of the postmodern sign is to disguise the fact that reality is no longer with us (39).

Reality is mostly constructed well in advance from its reproducibility as text in such a way that the real cannot be seen differently 'from what used to be able to be distinguished from it'. Literature and especially fiction as a genre is very useful in capturing the changing notions of reality. We finally in literature come across a rejection of traditional realism that is chronological plots, continuous narratives given by omniscient narrators, 'closed endings', etc. in preference for experimental forms of different kinds. The relationship between a work of fiction and its readers has been a subject of debate and discussion for a long time. The questions that need to be addressed are: 1. Do novels represent reality or are they all cooked up? 2. Are the novelists under the obligations to compare what happens in their works with what might have happened had the same events taken place in the real world? 3. Is the writer obliged to present a semblance of truth? Writers like Lionel Trilling feels that realism should be the stuff or substance on which the novels should be based on. Attempts have been made to recreate the real world around us in fictions written during the great "age of realism" by writers like Dickens, Eliot, Stendhal, and Dostoevsky. The novels written by writers like Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez are realistic writings designed

in a manner that portray the other side of reality not similar to the 19th century kind of realism. Barbara Foley, Linda Hutcheon, and Joanne Frye are the critics who are engaged in their task with fiction and reality in different ways. Out of the many assumptions that exist in the relationship between reality and the fictional narrative, one of it is that it attempts to portray life. And reality changes or alters and therefore the means of representing it will also change. The fact is that the unreality of reality is not the only theme that the postmodernist fiction can talk about. When we talk of the postmodernist novelists, we cannot afford to ignore the names of the three American postmodernist novelists like William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Their works, in the fictional representation of reality in its postmodern context, deserves critical attention, admiration and recognition. The novelists like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Brautigan, William S. Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., William Gass and Donald Barthelme interrogated the concepts like the concept of reality, truth and accepted belief(s). We can then say that it is in reaction to the type of false realism that the postmodern fiction assumes its disruptive stand. William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. tried in their own ways to subvert the so-called official or generally accepted view of the social reality. Realism in literature is normally understood as the expression of a belief in a commonly experienced phenomenological world. In fact Postmodernism overthrows this assumption of realism and makes use of negative evaluation of it, thereby refuting the epistemological grounds of realism. The so-called new novel is placed in a theoretical projection of postmodernism that the accepted reality is an illusion. We understand reality as something concrete through which we order our experience. The postmodern view deconstructs this position and asserts that reality is simulated. Therefore, it is a mode of simulacrum. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* underline a reality that is supposedly unreal for our conventional understanding. It confirms to Michel Foucault's discourse of madness that underlines the fact that madness is constructed socially as prohibitive, tabooed and unsocial. The whole discourse in fact deflects upon the conventional understanding of things and helps us to understand the real-real. Here the pertinent question is how does one define the real? The real has been conventionally defined and understood as something concretely available, socially acceptable and manifestly conventional. The postmodern novelists question this position and take us beyond the conventionality to an understanding of things which are self-reflexive and underpin the manifestation of unreal as real and the invisible as visible. *Naked Lunch* portrays a reality that is unreal and absent. It includes the necessary absurdities of life and minimizes it to a series of cruel and often pointless episodes. We see that time, place, plot and characters are not of any significance in the narrative except for narrative effects-effects that are significant for their disruptive traces, and latent meanings. Burroughs does not put efforts to create artificial situations or construct an elaborate plot. Writing folds upon itself as consciousness does:

> There is only one thing a writer can write about: What is in front of his senses at the moment of writing....I am a recording instrument....I do not presume to impose "story", "plot", "continuity"....In so far as I succeed in 'Direct' recording of certain areas of psychic process I may have limited function.... I am not an entertainer... (*Burroughs* 92).

In this sense, Burroughs can be ranked with "garrulous" American writers like Ezra Pound and William Carlos whose literary productions project to map the authors' consciousness, recorded over a period of years or even decades. This literature is confessional at its best, since it can function only if it is totally honest.

In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, we see Tyron Slothrop, the American whose hapless peregrinations form the bulk of the novel is troubled by his suspicions to which he calls as paranoid. We find that his notion of reality is either ruled by chance, and hence meaningless or else ruled by some latent powers which is at once "more real" than chance and more cruel, and the belief that this order, which is felt to lurk behind the debris of the world, is not merely secret, not just passively mysterious like a remote deity, but "systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop*(Gravity's Rainbow* 209). If the traditional novel describes reality in an attempt to give it a certain moral validity, the postmodern fiction like Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* seeks to show the form rather than the content of the novel. *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers a nonlinear mode of narration that, in Klinkowitz's words, created "a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary, the realistic and the fantastic, the sequential and the simultaneous, the author and the text". It has little resemblance to the traditional novel. There is no linear movement of the narrative, no intricate plot, crying for resolution. The protagonist who is a time-traveller can within a blink of his eye find himself in fire-bombed Dresden in the year 1944 and, by another blink, in llium, his home town in 1961. Billy Pilgrim had witnessed the firebombing by the Allies of Dresden at the fag-end of World War II. The experience was so drastic that Pilgrim got "unstuck in time". After getting "unstuck in time", he does not feel important to demarcate between past, present and future and also between the living and the dead. Vonnegut emphasises the importance of fantasy in order to make sense of the senseless in his Slaughterhouse-Five. According to him, fictions are answers to history and horror, 'real' horror forms one essential part of the book, and the process of the fantastic displacement the other. In the 'real life' , Billy undergoes the author's experience of a POW imprisoned in the Dresden Slaughterhouse, and saved by chance from the fireball which destroys the city. Vonnegut is at his best in fantasizing his real experiences as a prisoner in World War II. He felt after having written *Slaughterhouse-five* that he had nothing more to write if he did not want to.

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