

EXPERIMENTING WITH THE TREATMENT OF TIME: A SELECT STUDY OF THE FICTION OF ARUNDHATI ROY AND KIRAN DESAI

Shweta Kumari
Research Scholar
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh 221005

Abstract

Fiction in literature is a form of narration. Though it is supposed to be imagined work, it is not free from the observations of the writer and the readers about their real experiences. Possibilities and experiences in one's life as well as in a narrative fiction are limitless. Like a circle it has no end. As it has been said that fiction is a 'form' of narration, this form is supposed to have a structural character. A structure is always full of networks of internal relations. These relations work on various levels. A fictional text can be said to have a design of narrated events. These events are set in a particular style for the production of story. A narrative is supposed to have a definite temporal succession, causality and inversion. But this somewhat older notion of narrating a story has undergone a change with the developments in the ages. Instead of entertaining its readers, fiction is now more concerned with involving its readers. Open ended fiction or experimental structure of fiction in the contemporary time seeks to have a lasting impression on its readers by engaging them to produce their version of solutions.

A host of contemporary writers have adopted the tendency of open ended narrative fiction. Without being much anxious about proper beginning, middle and end, contemporary fiction tends to probe into problems of many kinds. The present paper will try to analyse the fictional work of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, the eminent writers of Indian English fiction. The study is concerned with the experimentation of narrative technique by the writers, in configuring events of the story. These writers, in their works, provide space to their reading audience hence readers cannot make the writers their guides in producing the story. This paper will try to recognise the outcomes of this open form of storytelling.

Key-words: fragmentation, fractured temporal experiences, open-ended, time, interpretation

We live in an age of multiplicity, where individuals are struggling to achieve a sense of order. Fragmentation has been felt more in intra-individual experiences than in inter-individual interactions. Any event or occurrence that fall on such splinters of individuality, show a variety of colours for its onlookers. This spectrum of colours is anything but a singular light that directs towards a pre-destined destination. Fiction as a literary genre explicitly displays events in one way or other. These events meet to the spectrum of readers having a range of experiences, which results into problematizing the interpretation of events generated into the fiction.

It is very hard to assign a particular date for the emergence of fiction. Its history dates back to centuries. In the same way it is also difficult to give a clear cut definition of fiction. But for the sake of starting an operational definition of fiction can be given. Fiction is a form of narrative, mainly in prose, that describes at least one event, inner or outer, and how this event has been experienced by a set of people; and what has been its consequence. In narrative the narrator gives us a narrative form which we are supposed to experience. The characters of fiction are placed into a 'time' and 'place' setting. The plot and episodes in the fiction lead the characters into some sort of conflict and thereby producing some consequences in the text, and some experience for its readers. Thus fiction is an event not only that is encoded in a written text but also what has been decoded by its readers.

Fiction is an instrument to look into one's self. In one way or other the encoded philosophy and circumstances has been actualised by its narrator. The narrator's written piece on whatever topic may give some hints about the philosophy or the way of thinking of the writer. Hence writer's self finds its expression, to an extent, in narration. Fiction is not only the realization of the narrator's self, but also realization of the selves of the readers since their history and imagination get merged with the history and experiences of the narrated characters.

In this age of ideological crisis and multiple realities the question of 'self' has become more intricate. The complexities of the outer world have naturally made their effects on inner world. The extent of individual's internal crisis has problematized the interpretation of self and narratives as well. The knotty experiences of the writer's self do not allow her to reach at any final conclusion since finality of phenomenon and experience are myth. The self is a subject to a constant change. Actualization of this fact results into breaking the so much accepted 'set up, conflict and resolution' format of plot. The order in the narrative is only suggestive without any definiteness. This new attempt to produce a text without singularity in resolution may be seen as a deliberate working since such text tries to overcome the decontextualizing and distancing tendency of readers. New fiction is prone to involve its readers more consciously and thus adopting open-ended, unstructured or semi-structured form of narratives.

This paper intends to observe why open-ended fiction and fluctuating temporal structure have been frequently embraced by the authors and how this tool seeks lasting impression on the reader's mind. For the purpose two eminent writers of the present time, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai have been chosen.

The only fiction of Arundhati Roy i.e. *The God of Small Things* has gained much praise not only for the theme she has dealt with but for her method, too, of dealing with the theme. The issues of subordination, torture, injustice, caste and class suppression, patriarchal oppression etc. have gained momentum due to her special linguistic and temporal experiments in the novel. The fractured temporal technique of the novel amplifies the polyphonic voices in the novel. The forward and backward movement within the novel always prohibits the readers to follow a linear plot and keeps them active to see and guess into the making of the story.

Roy has done her graduation in architecture and seems applying her learning of architecture in the making of the novel. The story is presented in front of us in much like the pieces of jigsaw puzzle. What we see is standing some walls here and some windows there. Sometimes making of the roof and other times working within the land. We are surprised at the mysterious nature of the building-making. Everything is started but nothing is finished and the story moves on to completion. Roy does not follow any chronological pattern of time. It is an ever flowing phenomenon. Sometimes the waves touch the present and sometimes the past. The past is existing in present and the present is shaping future. And thus allowing the reader to surmise and see the horrors of a patriarchal caste ridden society.

When the novel starts the readers are given the hint that something big and unwanted has already happened in the past. Easth is about to re-Returned and Rahel has come to Ayemenem to welcome him. The play on the word 're-Returned' and the use of capitalization give enough hint for the past. The Ayemenem house looks empty now. The characters are either gone somewhere or died. Chocko and Margaret are not here. Mammachi, Pappachi, Ammu, Velutha and Sophie Mol are dead, Esthais Returned and Rahelis in America. Only Baby Kochamma, along with Kochu Maria, is here 'still alive'. The readers are informed that Estha and Rahel are dizygotic twins and they are very deep into each other. Their parents are divorced. Ammu had died at the age of thirty-one and the readers don't know the reason. Then the scene of Sophie Mol's funeral opens. She is died of drawing; Ammu, Rahel and Estha are made to stand separate in the funeral ceremony like untouchables then Ammu goes to the police station to give statement about something and was called *veshya* by the inspector. After this something happens and Estha is Returned to his father and now he is going to be re-Returned. We meet Comrade Pillai who does not "hold himself in any way personally responsible for what had happened". We are informed about unfulfilled love of Baby Kochamma. Thus all the major characters are introduced in the first chapter. Denouement has already taken place, so we are not surprised on 'what' has happened rather we are curious to know 'how' it has happened.

Throughout the chapter the readers are given such hints again and again that though past is bygone but it is not passed. Every character bears the scars of past on its body and soul, and they will shape their future soon. The first chapter ends with a note that "it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (33). Madhu Benoit perceives it as a double treatment of time, "...a double-time pattern is built into the novel from the very beginning: chronological time, or time pertaining to the diegesis, which operates syntagmatically, and a-chronological time, or time pertaining to history, or the collective memory shared by a society which operates paradigmatically" (78). We soon recognise that one main incident within the story i.e. the arrival of Sophie Mol to Ayemenem, has been treated as a standard specific time to measure every other incident in the novel. Things either happened earlier of Sophie Mol's arrival or latter to it. In this way Roy has successfully blurred the temporal boundaries of the novel.

The novel, thus, proceeds by moving to and fro in the time. The readers collect the bits to create the happenings as a whole in their minds. The novel ends somewhere in the middle where Ammu and Velutha, even after knowing the consequences, accept each other as lovers. The reader knows the result of this union, it is already described and unchangeable in the same way as the destiny of a subaltern is already written by society before his/her birth. The caste system and patriarchy have already set the goal for every person, only the course of action is not so decided. However, it matters less as choices are fewer in following the path of pre-destined destination. Dissent is not allowed and punishment for the act of dissent, too, is pre-decided. The

novel highlights the horror of not being able to choose one's course of life. We know in advance that Velutha has been butchered, Ammu has forsaken by her family to live or die alone. Estha and Rahel are separated and thus spoiled their lives. These hair chilling consequences are stand in contrast with the pleasure of one moment that Ammu and Velutha feel in the last chapter. It was the time when both could feel their suppressed and neglected existence by accepting each other. Though they fear for future yet the urgency to revive their existence was important beyond limits. The novel ends with the word 'tomorrow' that gives hope for choosing one's own destiny by oneself, even when the script is already written one should not stop making choices.

The jumbled up structure of the novel works like magical construction of the building. The reader, like the writer, can choose to start from any point except the first and last chapter (and it is only for the sake of the novel's effect to be maintained). The kaleidoscopic making of the story provides different patterns to reach at the unchangeable destiny of the characters in the novel. Once the reader starts reading any chapter and then proceeds to any chapter and so on, the pieces of the puzzle gathers and fix slowly and thus making the story complete.

Along with providing a distorted sense of time Roy has provided multiple perspectives to the story. She has written the novel as a third-person person narrative. She utilises the scope of this technique and makes Rahel omniscient narrator. Rahel thinks about the past incidents, present situation and about every character. The tiny compartment kind of structure of the novel provides the characters their own separate and honest section so that their lives can be fully disclosed. In this way the outwardly simple narrative of lovers in a conservative social setup grows into providing multiple outlooks. As the study develops, the perspective also grows enough to demand independent currency within the text. It becomes hard for the readers to look into the narrative from one point of view. The novel seems to be a microcosm of life where all hypotheses and theories organize to form a whole. Postcolonial, psychoanalytical, feminist, Marxist, deconstructionist, cultural-materialism etc. are only some of the perspectives that are vested to create a narrative of life scale.

Kiran Desai is the writer of two highly acclaimed novels *Hullaballoo in Guava Orchard*(1998)and *The Inheritance of Loss*(2006). Both of her novels show her acute perception of human behaviour. She is the writer of life and presents it with comic tenderness. She skilfully narrates the fate of the characters with political undertone. Her outstanding understanding of the working of human mind enables her to present their characters as individuals with lives of their own. Her grasp of Indian soil is so strong that it presents all the close details of Indian ambience and presents India as an individual with life, shaping others fate. The paper concerns itself with the analysis of her first written novel *Hullaballoo in Guava Orchard* focusing on its strategy of ending.

The novel unfolds the destiny of a dreamer Sampath who finds himself unfit in his physical and psychological setting. Dissatisfied with his surroundings he finds his escape in a guava orchard in Shahkot. Though the novel is ringing with comic overtone, it is satirical and presents unpleasing realities of life. It tells the story of love, family relationship, faith and bureaucratic and administrative breakdown. The novelist traces the protagonist's psychological shaping with his uneasiness and agony. Sampath's conducts speak the condition of the present day individuals. It is not surprising if one identifies oneself with the characters of the novel in the course of going through it. The events of the novel recreate some images in our mind that are pleasing and suddenly changes into annoying and confusing reflections. Like Sampath we also would like to escape from this world of confusion and infuriating realities to the world of

freedom, peace and solace. Such imagination and yearning may be shaped and transform with the passage of time but they can never come to an end like the ending of the novel.

The treatment of time is very significant and responsible for loose structure of fiction. The focus of attention is not the action of characters unfolded with the passage of time but time that reveals itself within human and their action. The infinite span of time cannot be exposed with some countable number of actions of individuals in a piece of writing. The novelist illustrates this state when describing Kulfi:

The house was small for her big desire. She walks from the tiny blue bathroom to the kitchen thick with the smell of kerosene, around the table and chairs, up and down the balcony, down the stairs past the rooms of neighbours who shook their heads over her, then around the jamun tree in the middle of the courtyard. (4)

Kulfi's condition is quite explanatory of the writers and reader's inability to find a solution of the situation. Ideas, solutions and again new problems keep on presenting itself with unfolding of time. This dialectic of human emotion is never ending and this provides the same fate to fiction. The infinite possibility of events and human aspirations are well shown when the novelist tells about Kulfi's desire, "Her stomach grew larger, her dreams of eating more extravagant. The house seemed to shrink. All about her summer stretched white-hot into an infinite distance" (7). The confusion and chaos keeps on growing making the old ones less appealing. They never get lasting solution but reappear in new form as the novelist says about Sampath's birth, "When there was almost no space left to draw on any more... packed tight to the point of bursting, Sampath was born" (8). And thus a new stream of thoughts and confusion emerges.

The author has handled the plot, sub-plot and different asides in the novel brilliantly. They are synthesised in one to make their claim of impossibility of end even stronger. The confusion in the story never rests down. The last chapter of the novel takes this confusion to the highest summit. The character's desire for independence took them to incredible and fantastic results that are anything but permanent. Sampath's desire to escape, Pinky's waiting for the Hungry hop ice cream boy, Kulfi's exotic dream dish, Brigadier's attempt to move the monkeys out and Chawla family's endeavour to stop his son from vanishing collide with one another and collapsed without any final result. Even the last line of the novel leaves its readers in confusion when it says, "In the pot were spices and seasonings, herbs and fruit, delicious gravy. And something else. Gingerly, they approached the bubbling cauldron" (209). Nobody can determine what or who was it? The novel presents some thematic concerns and explores the connection between time and experience. The novelist gives a functional conclusion at the end of the novel that never produces any conclusive effect. At the end nothing is really ended or resolved. Everything has been left at high peak to be considered by the readers since the solutions suggested by author may obstruct the chances of active thoughts and opinions on the part of readers. Thus the novel being an open ended novel tends to involve its readers on more active basis and looks for their opinions regarding a complex situation.

The ending of above mentioned works suggest only a temporary halt. Whether voluntary or involuntary decision, they serve as a tool within the text to influence and engage their readers. This case of ending may be an entirely unconscious pronouncement since the writer of the present time belongs to this very age of uncertainty. The indeterminate and ambiguous nature of realities, having multiple possibilities, does not allow it to contract into one single text. Unable to find a solution within oneself the writer may fail to provide a fix point to resolve the dilemma

created within the text. On the other hand, this unstructured end of fiction may be a conscious decision of the writers. Open ended structure helps them to pose a question before the audience and allow them to revisit and revise the events. The writers do not wish to tire out the possibilities and restrict their thought to defined limit.

The treatment of time in above works plays a crucial role for being them open ended. Instead of manipulating action narrators have shifted their attention on the working of time. The thematic presentation of the narrative has affected by temporal unfolding. Thus the fluctuation of time in the novels increase the tension and prepares the reader for impending unpleasant episodes. In the flow of time problems make themselves more obvious and their complexity reaches to the point of no return. The reader flows in the continuity of time even though the word exhaust in the text. The above mention works produce a sense of fractured time because in the place of demonstrating action with progress in time they are more interested in unfolding of time expressed through action.

Experience is an open process. Experience is not only what we face and learn but it is also what we see, hear and understand about people and things around ourselves. Such experience is continuous. The open ended fiction might have raised the complexity of interpretation but it always allows spontaneous unstructured responses from its readers. They provide the readers a new chance to re-write their version of possibilities and solutions. Many factors like uncertainty, intricacy, inexhaustible nature of human aspirations, faith in future possibility and treatment of time have made the unfinished fiction to be interpreted by the audience. Instead of judging it as good or bad one may look forward to the spectrum of meaning and anticipations that increases opportunity for its readers to be the active participant and the creator of meaning.

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Bio-note: I am a Senior Research Fellow in Banaras Hindu University. The area of my specialization is Indian writing in English particularly contemporary Indian fiction writers. The topic of my Ph.D. thesis ‘Representation of Subalternity and Resistance in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English: A Select Study’ and I am working on the novels of Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga.