THE RETURN TO STORYTELLING: TWO EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse two works of fiction belonging to authors promoted by an Indian publishing house, Pepperscript. The anthology of short stories Unmasked, published in 2016, and the novel The November Note, published in 2013, are examples of the "return to the fairy-tale tradition" (Vianu 2007: 143). This means that they contain all the elements of a traditional story: mystery, excitement, twists of plot, the unexpected, and lots of action.

Keywords: plot; Modernism; Postmodernism; fairy-tale tradition; story.

Introduction

With the epoch of Joyce and the Modernists, a change occurred as to how the stories in novels went. Lidia Vianu (2012: 9) explains the phenomenon relating it to the way fiction in novels became more poetic and thus the plot of the story was no longer the plot known by the readers:

> poetic concentration killed the story. It almost killed the hero (who is usually the outcome of his story, but who, since Modernism, has separated himself from the narrative), and it alienated a reader who claimed his right to his fairy tale, his dream of a nonexistent clear, logical, predictable world, which only literature could offer. The texts written by Joyce, Woolf, Eliot were quite confusing.

The story was left to be reconstructed, and imagined by the reader, who would need to be very attentive and place all incidents where they should be according to a linear, progressive timing.

According to Michael Levenson, in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Modernism[1] is defined as "the epoch marked by such names as Joyce and Woolf, Pound and Eliot, Eisenstein and Brecht, Freud and Marx" (Levenson 2005: 1). Modernism is thus located in time and in a context of theories that represent both a mode of thought and a way of shaping reality. An important concern of Modernism in literature is represented by questions of technique, such as what it is that makes a poem a poem, or how long a poem should be. Additionally, it is useful to consider the idea "… that every element of the work is an instrument of its effect and therefore open to technical revision" (Levenson 2005: 3). Such self-reflexive aspects separate the Modernist novel from the traditional novel in terms of the representation of reality. Readers perceive the story in a novel where there are no reflections on the very process of writing in a certain way. They will perceive the story in a novel with comments on the process of writing, with interrogations on the truth of a certain character's story in a different way. Woolf propels readers to doubt the truth of a story even while they are reading it. In *An Unwritten Novel*, the narrator, a writer, imagines a whole story centered on one person she sees for the first time. Towards the end of the short story, some of the writers' assumptions prove false, enough to place doubt in the readers' minds as to the nature of fiction.

[1] According to Zsolt Virágos, "The term has been applied *retrospectively*" (2008: 157).

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This method applies to Graham Swift's writing too. For instance, in *Shuttlecock*, Prentis is aware that he is writing his story. Once one of the characters writes his own story, readers wonder how reliable he is as a narrator. However, there is something else at work here: readers no longer experience the story as an illusion of something real. Instead they become more aware of the very process of creating fiction. The illusion of the story is lost.

The time of such experiments seems to have ended lately, in the epoch after Postmodernism. The examples given by the anthology *Unmasked* and by the novel *The November Note* offer readers the return to a world of imagination which is there beyond questioning, to a world of make-believe. The readers and the writers reach the conclusion that they need to feel the thrill of fiction.

The two novels do belong to mainly Indian authors, yet they are accessible to a larger public due to the fact that they are written in the English language. They also express universal wishes regarding plunging into the world of fiction.

The Anthology *Unmasked*

One character, several sides, several stories: this is not an unusual device of telling a story, from various perspectives, of various characters. It has been seen in Graham Swift's novels, Virginia Woolf's novels, and others. However, this book is different. The various perspectives are written by different authors, coming from various backgrounds.

The authors that are part of this anthology were given a character, called Ruby, and a description of her. They were told she was a mysterious twenty-five-year old woman. They were left to imagine a story about her. Each story shows us a different side of Ruby, the editors claim. The technique reminds of Virginia Woolf's short story *An Unwritten Novel*, where the narrator imagines a story about a lady she travels with. In a similar way, each author works his or her short story after seeing Ruby and her brooding expression.

Published in India, the Indian culture of the majority of the authors has left its mark on every story. One thing is for sure: they prefer stories with plot and they are very Romantic. Fairy-tale and drama go hand in hand. They are very good psychologists, knowing about the feelings of a young girl in love. A particular feature of the Indian culture is found in the marriages arranged by the parents. Yet, universal elements are also present: the way society judges you in various situations, the way you understand certain issues when you come to deal with them if someone close goes through addiction to alcohol, for instance. Ruby has even been the victim of a rape in one of the stories. She has been abandoned by her lover after an accident leaving her without the possibility if ever having a baby, she has been able of achieving her dream of becoming a designer during an arranged marriage and her relationship with her husband has also improved, she has had a past where in an accident she lost her eyesight but a relative who died decided to donate his eyes to her, she has been the victim – or has she? – of a husband who ended up coming home drunk, beating her even when pregnant, killing her baby and finally she committed the perfect murder on him. Of course, he deserved it. Ruby herself is a writer in some stories. Even when she is blind, she dictates stories to her boyfriend who writes them on the computer. In one of the stories, we are led to believe Ruby the writer could kill herself but she returns to the restaurant to continue her story.

This anthology illustrates perfectly a wish to return to what Lidia Vianu has called the "fairy-tale tradition." (Vianu 2007: 143) Here is what happened in the history of literature:

> The Desperadoes, born into the defiance of the previous nineteen-century fairy-tale tradition, took the death of chronological causality and love interests for granted; they put into practice what Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot had preached one literary movement before them. […] How did Desperadoes manage to be different from Modernists? By focussing on suspense/ the 'telling' instead of the 'told'. Their suspense was a rediscovery of the fairy-

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> tale in a way. The author felt he had to feed his reader a story, but, technique-addicted as he was, and born from stream-of-consciousness (meaning highly intellectual) parents, he could not help himself: he told his story in a tricky/surprising/complicated way. The Desperado suspense focused more on 'how'/'the telling' than on 'what'/ 'the told'. (Vianu 2007: 143)

The editors and writers of the comments in the anthology show their preference to stories that have a plot, beginning, middle and ending.

***The November Note* by Sanchit – Prateek**

Pepperscript, from India, publishes this novel written by two young friends, as we can infer from reading the authors' note. The novel is about young people from India and their families, living in a contemporary world, with school and high technology, as well as with the age old dilemmas of relationships parents – children, decisions about future careers and studies, falling in love, friendships, and others.

The plot is about young Indian boys who go to study in a campus for becoming future engineers. They have doubts about their future careers and about making it when it comes to the exams. Their parents seem to have high expectations, yet they are most likely worried about the future of their children and simply trying, through discipline, to help them have a stable income in their lives. As if these issues are not enough for them to struggle with, they wonder about the future relationships with the other boys from the hostel and from their own rooms that they share. Will their roommates make good friends, and their stay in the hostel easier? They start knowing each other, they have a few issues with the older students, and then some other issues appear when they fall in love. We see how friends try to help each other to solve their issues with their girlfriends. For instance, they try to make things easier when it comes to meeting some girls, and even help with making the girls' birthday special, romantic, with creative ideas. One of the boys gets into trouble for speaking too much on the mobile phone with a girl he is in love with. His father pays for the phone bill until he decides to confront his son about this and reproaches him for not taking his studies seriously. The mother is more understanding, she wonders what her son is up to, at some point she is worried if he does not do drugs, then she gives him her phone to talk to that girl and even buys for the girl her son is in love with a very nice dress as a birthday present.

At some point, things get problematic with the girlfriends of two young boys. They face similar issues, with their girlfriends feeling upset that they do not get enough attention and that their boyfriends do not spend enough time with them, feeling neglected. This can only make readers smile, as the two friends come to believe that their girlfriends are crazy.

There is, however, a serious issue in the story, an accident that actually opens up this novel and makes us wonder what happened and why.

This happening adds a bit of mystery to a story that looks like being about everyday incidents, college life, and lighthearted incidents, with a bit of romance. It's about the life of Indian youths. We are impressed about their dramas and we sympathize with all their romantic adventures and reflections about their future. The drama, however, is yet to come. This adds a bit of suspense to the story about friendship, as it is announced on the book cover.

As Pepperscript Publishing House has started creating expectations for Romantic stories with the volume *Unmasked*, it continues on the same note with this novel. We can forget about the experimentalism led to the extreme of literature that comes after Postmodernism. There is a clear return to the traditional way of telling a story, to plot, Romance and suspense.

The falling in love part is very honest and paragraphs expressing the deep emotion are there for anyone to relate:

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> Every lover says, 'Ours is a different case.' The format remains the same. First, become friends, in case it is love at first sight, still become friends. Then after few days propose and start dating, which is pretty smooth in the beginning and later the friction develops as the furnishing starts to wear out and finally love becomes a habit. You just need your love to be there whether you are honest or not.
> My story started on a completely different note (as every lover says!). First we became friends, then I slowly fell in love with her, I told her that I love her, she took her time and acknowledged her love as well. And this was only the smooth beginning. (Sanchit – Prateek 2013: 23)

You can find several levels of the story in this novel: friendship story, love story, teen fiction, academic novel, and perhaps other readers will discover even more.

Conclusions

Regardless of the "return to the fairy-tale tradition" (Vianu 2007: 143) present in both works of fiction, we still see reminders of the epoch of experimenting with the plot. The two books are situated at a crossroads. They are examples of classic love interest novels, similarly to the ones before Modernism and Postmodernism, yet there are also little instances which remind us that they are only nostalgic returns to what fiction once used to be.

What was fiction like before Modernism? Lidia Vianu sums it up as follows:

> Before Modernism, all stories were fairy tales. The fairy-tale pattern was an orderly way of organizing human life from birth to death (past, present and future), according to the narrative universal. The fairy tale wrapped the chronological skeleton in feeling, the feel of real life, and it won the readers over by focussing on *love interest*. (Vianu 2012: 20).

The entire idea of the anthology *Unmasked* shows an instance of participating in fiction, as various authors imagine the story of a mysterious young woman, and the results of their imaginings form a whole book. However, the response of the authors shows that they prefer a traditional type of story and not a story dealing with narrative experiments. They prefer lots of actions and unexpected twists of plot, not a type of novel reminding of Virginia Woolf's. The stories imagined by writers about Ruby remind of a device used in Virginia Woolf's and Graham Swift's novels, that of characters imagining stories about other characters. The result of the process, however, is different. Whereas in Woolf's and Swift's novels the imagined stories focus on the way the story is created, in the *Unmasked* anthology, a genuine fictional world is being created.

What happens when characters imagine stories about other characters? Do they think about artistic creation or do they just make suppositions about why another character acts in a certain way in certain situations? Freud's theories on day-dreaming, fantasy and mental representation or Romantic poets' theories on imagination can provide an explanation for the characters' imaginings. The reason for imagining stories about other characters is related to illustrating the process of writing fiction (and expressing an opinion related to literary trends). It is also an attempt to understand the past or future of a character's personality. This form of truth-seeking brings into question the theory of projection in psychoanalysis, which holds that what we see in others may be an image of ourselves, reflecting our own thoughts, feelings, or desires. The imagined stories in Woolf's and Swift's novels are about other fictional characters; they reflect the dilemmas of the character who imagines them, yet they also make reference to other literary texts. Those other literary texts are, mostly, poems.

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According to Freud, the artist can choose and make changes in the unconscious material. This and the way the artist transforms his egotistic fantasies into something acceptable for public appreciation are parts of the artist's gift. The fantasies of a man of artistic talent give us pleasure, and while we might find that the fantasies of an ordinary day-dreamer have something in common with ours, his 'work' would not have the same value as a true, gifted artist's; the daydreamer will not be interested in sharing his 'work' and reworking it for the public.

Coleridge's theories on imagination explain stories characters imagine about other characters. Coleridge defines two types of imagination: primary and secondary. Primary imagination is spontaneous, while secondary imagination is created consciously. There is also fancy, which is "the lowest form of imagination", according to Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*: "With fancy there is no creation involved; it is simply a reconfiguration of existing ideas." (Coleridge 1986: 378-395) We could think about the stories characters imagine about others as instances of Coleridge's primary imagination. These moments are spontaneous. Characters make no conscious effort in creating them. Since they are preoccupied with the other characters, they reflect on them. Also, they base their imaginings on various facts. In Postmodernist fiction, there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of reality. This is what Lyotard suggests in his book *The Postmodern Condition*:

> Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. (Lyotard 1984: xxiv)

The multiple interpretations of reality in a Postmodernist world lead us to the conclusion that there is no one universally true perspective. On the other hand, Jean Baudrillard brings to our attention the fact that there are always illusions, or simulacra, which mislead our knowledge of reality, and this supports the idea of multiple perspectives and interpretations.

From this standpoint, thus, the *Unmasked* anthology can be an example of fiction in the making, of each writer showing his own perspective on the main character's story.

As for the novel *The November Note*, it is a genuine fictional story, with no Postmodernist remark on the way the story is told and created. From this point of view, it is a truly believable story, which also contains a love story according to the fairy-tale tradition coined by Vianu (2007: 143).

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