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Metafiction : Self - Reflexivity in John Fowles ' The French Lieutenant 's Woman and Paul

Auster's City of Glass.

Abstract: Traditionally realistic novels, expected to mirror reality, acted as models for creating and establishing the worth of any other novel. Since literature has been evolving pretty fast (mostly since 1930s), so new trends and new genres have been invented by writers from time to time in order to refresh the exhausted literature. Metafiction is one such trend, one such narrative, one such genre which have taken literature to the zenith. This paper contends to show that metafiction works against the fictional illusion created by the realistic and traditional narrative which dominated literature mostly novel since ages. The paper seeks to study the metafictional elements in John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant Woman* (1969) and Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985). I would base my paper upon Patricia Waugh's ideas which she demonstrated in her study about metafiction. Furthermore, in order to prove it, I would undertake John Barth's essay, 'The literature of Exhaustion' and 'The Literature of Replenishment' to prove my point. Through this study I would lay bare the conventions of realism and realistic literature and would show how metafiction breaks this fourth wall and explicitly draws reader's attention towards its self – reflexivity, towards its artificiality, towards its fictionality.

Keywords: Metafiction, Realism, Self-Reflexivity, Postmodernism, John Fowles, Paul Auster.

“This story I am telling is all imagination.....”

“But I am a novelist.....”

“You may think novelist always have fixed plans to which they work.....”

“I have disgracefully broken the illusion?.....”

(John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant Woman* (1969))

“At his apartment, Auster explained to me what little he knew about Quinn.....”

“Auster seemed to take my words to heart”

(Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (1985)

Novel, since its birth in the late 17th century early 18th century, relied on some standards, norms, values, and assumptions which later became a tradition for every novelist to follow, and shape one's novel keeping in mind the traditional, the modal which reflected nothing seal but a fictional illusion. The narrative in these traditionally realistic novels went smoothly in a linear way having a proper begin, a proper middle portion and a proper end. Novels like “*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman* (1761-67), *Don Quixote* (1605-15), *Vanity Fair* (1847) and so on were exceptionally odd and strange, but experimental and entertaining at the same time; because these novels betrayed the then narrative tradition.

These novels were perhaps the first explicitly laying bare their fictional nature, made reader aware about their constructedness as art as fiction, i.e., reader knows that he/she is reading is no longer real but rather a fictional work. This kind of narrative which draws attention towards its fictionality, artificiality is known as ‘Metafiction’. Metafiction, literally means, fiction about fiction i.e., fiction that includes within itself reflections on its own fictional identity. The term metafiction was coined by novelist William H.Gass in his 1970 essay entitled, “*Philosophy and the Form of Fiction*”

Metafiction became a prominent and dominant genre of literature, after 1960s with the works like “*Lost in the Funhouse* by John Barth, *The Babysitter and the Magic Poker*, by Robert Coover, *Slalughterhouse – Five and Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles, and so on.

Metafiction is both a narrative technique and a genre of fiction. Wherein a work of fiction - novel, drama, poem, film etc. self consciously or deliberately and openly draws attention to the fact that what you are reading or viewing is actually an

imagination, a construction, a cultural product. Through irony and self reflection, metafiction poses critical & philosophical questions about the relation between fiction and reality. What presentational theatre is to theatre, metafiction is to literature. Presentational theatre reminds audiences continually that they are viewing a play. In the same way metafiction reminds readers that they are reading a work of fiction. So, we call presentational theatre as Metatheatre.

Metafiction is a style, a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement, referred as postmodernism. The increased social and cultural self consciousness partly resulted in the increased awareness of 'Meta' levels (metatheatre, metafiction, meta – language, etc.) of discourse and experience.

Metafiction is a construction of fictional work and its reflexivity by itself through systematic narrative techniques. Metafictional literature is more fictional than traditionally realist literature which hides its identity i.e., its fictionality, and thus becomes an illusion. In realistic literature, reader enters a contract, for the sake of enjoyment, through 'Willing Suspension of Disbelief' i.e., reader's willingness to believe unbelievable and be lied. But in metafiction, this contract ends and willing suspension of disbelief is suspended itself for the sake of reader. The entertainment is not sacrificed in any form rather metafiction does provide more entertainment than realism provides.

Metafiction systematically breaks this fourth wall i.e reader's or viewer's illusion which makes a reader or viewer believe unbelievable work of art as real. Many critics believe that metafiction is sounded death-bell of literature, while as many believe it is the up-to-the minute i.e., immediately prior invention in an ever - changing field. First class of critics depreciate genre's self referential nature, because for them, work of art-poem, novel or drama does not appear real. The second class critics appreciate and favour the genre, and are in an opinion that metafiction must not to be bound by constraints and chains realism imposes, and must not therefore concern itself with appearing real.

Metafiction is an experimentation in narration, making commentary on the art of fiction. Metafiction is more fictitious than fiction, more enjoying; as it sets reader or viewer at an active end of interpretation process. Metafiction makes reader's involvement in the piece of work, and thus gives him or her more space. It is ultimately a rejection of

traditional storytelling. Although it does not give up exclusively and at once all the standards of realism, but rather use those standards in a different and self reflexively.

According to John Barthes, in his 1967 essay entitled, “The literature of Exhaustion”, literary realism is Used Up tradition it has exhausted i.e., conventional modes of literary representation has been used up their possibilities consumed through over use. And in another of his 1967 essay entitled, “The Literature of Replenishment” that there is need of renewal of modes of literary representation which have been exhausted by consistent and continuous use both by writers and by readers.

Readers are accustomed to exhausted literature modes i.e., when a reader picks up a novel, he/she knows what he/she is getting: a made up story consisting of a conflict (or more), characters competing with needs and motivation, and a resolution. The postmodern critics and writers think that readerly expectations are somewhat narrow; and need of the hour is to broaden it.

Meta fiction in the French Lieutenant’s Woman and City of Glass.

Both of these novels are exclusively self reflexive in their nature. Realistic plots are lost the moment plots are intruded by author’s insertion. In both the novels author becomes a character at some places in the novel. I will discuss separately the metafictional elements novels use through narrative.

Meta fiction in the French Lieutenant’s Woman novel.

The French lieutenant’s woman (1969) is one of the postmodern masterpieces penned by English novelist – John Fowles. The novel has a brilliantly woven plot with author’s presence in it.

John Fowles was a postmodern writer of some experimental and ever entertaining novels which still dominate the world of literature, the tastes of readers, the minds of critics. The art of narration Fowles invented was remarkable and historic. His novels like The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1969), The Magus (1965), A Maggot (1985), etc. are famous for their unconventional narrative techniques. The French Lieutenant’s Woman is the most entertaining, reader-centred and solid representative of metafiction.

Is The French Lieutenant's Woman novel self reflexive?

“But I am a novelist, not a man in garden I can follow her where I like?.....

(The French Lieutenant's Woman, Chapter 13)

“But novelist write for countless different reasons: for money for reviews, for parents, for friends, for loved one.....”

(The French Lieutenant's Woman, Chapter 13)

The French Lieutenant's Woman is a brilliant piece of metafiction set in Victorian period. Fowles uses the techniques of recreating the Victorian novel with a critical sense of parody. Fowles departs from Victorian conventional novel writing in a systematic way. The way the novelist uses epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter, makes readers skeptically aware of multiplicity of Victorian Voices.

The novel is, however, famous for its authorial presence in it, making it a brilliant example of metafiction genre. The novel loses its realistic plot the moment readers enters Chapter Thirteen (13) of the novel. The reader enjoys the novel in a conventional manner upto Chapter Twelve (12) and the moment reader enters Chapter Thirteen (13) he /she is lost i.e., taken away in a bizarre way by making him/her aware about their role and about the nature of novel as construction, as a story. The illusion of realism is torn down in Chapter Thirteen by breaking the fourth wall on the author's part. The reader is awared about novel's artificially and fictionality, that he/she reading is a construct, a story, a frame which is true to the pages of the novel. As we see author intrudes the novel by breaking the conventions of Victorian novel:

“I donot know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mid. I have pretended until now to know my characters, minds and innermost thoughts.

(The French Lieutenant's Woman, Chapter 13)

The novel is highly self reflexive thus highly experimental. The novel has multiple endings, which is against Victorian conventions. The novel is reader centred particularly in the end. The reader is set free from Victorian conventions and norms and is allowed to enjoy his / her meaning making. The reader is forced to come out of fictional illusion that he/she reading is a literary realism. The reader becomes sure that the teller of the story is its inventor and not a simple recorder of events that really happen.

Metafictional novels like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) aim to unsettle reader's convictions about the relative status of truth and fiction by breaking this frame, this construction, and thus makes reader aware by realization of how the meanings, assumptions, and values of that world have been constructed and how they can be changed or challenged.

The way novel ends i.e., novel's multiple endings is another metafictional element that breaks the frame Victorian novels were accustomed. This presentation of alternative and untraditional endings puts reader at the superior level as compared to a single, conventional ending which restricted the reader's active role in interpreting novel.

Fowles' use of three alternative endings to his novel are probably related to his enjoyment of the idea of freedom. By giving three alternative endings, Fowles determines to establish his right not to satisfy the expectations that his use of Victorian conventions has raised or created. Through this, Fowles makes us realize and believe that life has an infinity of possible endings.

The French Lieutenant's Woman novel is not a fiction that presents the illusion of reality as an actual experience. Instead, it is a metafiction that makes readers aware of that illusion. The novel breaks that illusion when novelist i.e., John Fowles himself becomes a character (as in Chapter 55), talks to other characters discusses their problem, and fixes a course of action for them.

Self Reflexively in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*.

“And who do you want to speak to?”

“Always the same man. Auster. The man who calls himself Pal Auster.”

(City of Paul, P,10-11)

City of Glass (1985) novel is a meta - detective fiction from the New York Trilogy – a series of three novels. The other two novels are Ghosts (1986) and Locked Room(1986) . This trilogy set the writer in the list of postmodern writers.

City of Glass is a highly metafictional novel, breaking the construction realistic fiction weaves around. It suspends the contract of willing suspension of disbelief existing between the work of art and the reader. The novel explores layers of identity and reality, from Paul Auster the writer of the novel to the unnamed ‘author’ who reports the events as reality to Paul Auster the writer’ a character in the story, to ‘Paul Auster’ the detective, who may or may not exist in the novel. As we see in the beginning of novel (page 7) a telephone bell rings and asks:

“Is this Paul Auster?” asked the voice.

“I would like to speak to Mr. Paul Auster”

“There’s no one here by that name”

“Paul Auster of the Auster Detective Agency”

“I’m sorry”, said Quinn, “You must have the wrong number”

“This is a matter of utmost urgency,” said the voice.

“There’s nothing I can do for you,” said Quinn. “There is no Paul Auster here.”

(City of Glass page 7)

Metafiction plays a significant role in City of Glass. In this case also, author involves himself in the story, in fact is a character in the novel. Author’s self intrusion in the novel makes it appear different and odd but interesting and entertaining. The author does this under a translucent glass by introducing a character of the same name – Paul Auster, and who too is a writer.

The other surfictional or metafictional element in the novel is the name of Paul Auster’s real wife – Siri. At one place in the novel, Quinn also takes the name and role of

Paul Auster. Yet once more, we see the narrator meeting Paul Auster. In fact the narrator and the writer Paul Auster decide to look for Quinn in Stillman's apartment. At the end of the novel the author involves himself directly letting the reader know that he has written the book by means of Quinn's 'Red – Notebook'.

Conclusion:-

Both novelists John Fowles and Paul Auster have left no stone unturned in creating their novels experimental and entertaining through metafiction. Both the novels are rich in self reflexive elements. In both novels the act of authorial intrusion, through narrative intrusion, has fictionalized, trivialized and doubled the identity of the author.

The author descends from his superior position of creator by entering the very text he is composing: breaking the borderline between the creator and the created. This authorial intrusion makes the authors powerless in terms of their position in the text and in terms of structurally textual control.

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