

Aishwarya Mishra

Ravenshaw University

Cuttack, Odisha, India

aishwaryam000@gmail.com

### A Metafictional Study of Umberto Eco's The Name of The Rose

#### Abstract

This paper intends to present that the faculty of recording events constantly structures a work of art by way of bestowing a renewed perception to it. History was primarily associated with the mainstream literature and the issues were basically linguistic constructs. The early Greek and Roman writers like Quintillian, Cicero, Tacitus, Polybius, Plutarch, Lucian are some of the writers who recorded history and were mostly concerned with the faculty of rhetoric. After the commencement of the technique of Metafiction, there is a revival of narratives that deploy the traditional historical elements in the manner of fictionalization and representation of the same. Thus, Metafiction is the process which creates a story anew by using references from history. Under this purview, the novels assert their claim to historical facts with contradiction. The reader is kept moving in the narrative in an attempt at finding the main plot or conclusion. It is fundamentally a parodic reworking of the textual past of the world. It is laid by collective consciousness of social and political realities which balances the individual consciousness. The social and artistic, past and present are inseparable. Umberto Eco, the Italian novelist and Semiotician puts forth his view that the present postmodern works restructure the past by fictionalizing it and maintain the notion that past cannot be neglected or destroyed. It is all about imaginative refurbishing of the past through the process of accessing and writing the knowledge of the past with the use of the

technique of Metafiction. This takes historiography into another direction where historical facts and events remodel themselves.

Keywords: metafiction, linguistic construct, parodic reworking, signifier, temporal distortion.

## Introduction

*The Name of the Rose* sets forth its historical facts and heightened imagination effectively. In spite of the fact that Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is a murder mystery, it uniquely questions the possibility of truth using Metafictional elements from literary, theological and philosophical standpoints. The term 'metafiction' is coined in 1970 by the American novelist William H. Gass in his book *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. Gass elucidates that the use of 'metafiction' results in developing a sense of thorough understanding of the text in the minds of the readers. It is a process in which the author calls attention to the staginess of a work of art giving significant emphasis on willing suspension of disbelief and departing from other novelistic techniques and modes of narration. It blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction by way of making the readers realize that they are reading a work of fiction.

The elements of metafiction are evident in the beginning of the novel. In the prologue, an unnamed narrator elucidates how the transcription of a fourteenth-century manuscript came into being, comprising the memoir of a German monk, Adso of Melk. The prologue provides the reader with a context and makes it easier for the reader to understand under what circumstances the novel is written.

The narrator exhibits uncertainty in the authenticity of the manuscript. Initially, he came across a nineteenth century French-translation manuscript of Abbe Vallet published by "Abbaye de la Source". He recorded Adso's memoirs but the book was stolen by his lady

friend with whom he was romantically involved and had a bad experience. It was impossible for him to ask the book back. He searched for the book in various libraries but failed to find. Surprisingly, he got the information that no such writer named Abbe Vallet published books in the first half of nineteenth century.

The narrator was overlaid with doubts on the originality of the manuscript of Adso's account. After two years, while he was foraging a bookshop in Buenos Aires, he found quoted lines from Adso's memoirs in an Italian translation of a Georgian book. The book quoted a Latin work of seventeenth-century author Father Athanasius Kircher who on the other hand was quoting Adso. Now the narrator was sure about the existence of Adso's manuscript by Abbe Vallet. Even though the origin of the manuscript cannot be located, echoes of Adso's text can be found quoted by writers of other books. This propensity of texts referring to other texts and sources is remarkably portrayed throughout the novel.

The prologue alludes to Gerard Genette's concept of paratextuality. In this concept, the text is not an autonomous entity. The writers from the past take hold of the text. They are modestly referred to thereby resulting in multifarious interpretations. Genette defines paratext as: "For us, accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and more generally, to the public...an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside" (1-2). The impetus to the book lies in the peritext which is a forward, prologue, or a preface.

In spite of the fact that the narrator is in a state of dubiety of the genesis of the text, he embarks on an Italian translation with the available references and evidences. He illustrates that the events which Adso describes in his account occurred in 1327 but he has recorded them in the year 1400. He puts forth that the manuscript is split into seven days and each day is further divided into eight sections correlating with the hours of the day during which the

monks pray. The hours are named as matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, nones, vespers and compline. The narrator also states that the introductory remarks to every chapter must have been added by Vallet and the story is told in Adso's point of view. Adso, during the last days of his life before preparing for his death, mirrors the events that took place in November 1327 when he was an eighteen-year-old novice Benedictine monk. He professes that he will not explicate the causes of the events that occurred rather he will supply "signs" for the readers to decode the meanings.

The problematization of the interpretations of signs is core to the novel. It tries to show how same signs have different meanings and different signs lead to the same sign. Instead of delivering the actual and ultimate meaning, there is sequential chain of signifiers. Owing to this the reader gets bewildered, baffled and mystified. It is like a game played between an author and a reader in which the author leaves clues and it is the sole duty of the reader to comprehend the clues and reach a certain conclusion. The reader plays an active role in the text while the author has minimum contribution to the text.

To support the reader, the author provides some context which will make the work of the reader easier. He explains the political condition of Italy in the year 1320 when the Papal authority was in Avignon, in France when the Popes were linked with the French kings. There were power conflicts between Pope John XXII and Holy Roman Emperor, Louis the Bavarian. The Pope claimed his right to nominate the Emperor while the Emperor claimed his right to nominate his Bishops. The struggle was based on either church or the monarch will hold the ultimate and supreme power in medieval Europe. Pope expelled the Emperor and the Emperor called the Pope 'a heretic'.

Adso's father supported the Emperor. To avoid becoming the victim of political and religious conflicts of the day resulting in the state, he removed Adso from his monastery at

Melk. He sent him to Italy with the assistance of the English Franciscan and detective, William of Baskerville. They journeyed to the abbeys present in north Italy which had alliances with the Emperor and castigated the corrupt Pope.

The novel is treated as a pastiche with Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. William of Baskerville is an archetype of Sherlock Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Hound of Baskerville* and William of Ockham, the English Franciscan friar and scholastic philosopher.

He works as an inquisitor and prosecutes the heretics. He exhibits enormous power of deductive reasoning and syllogism. By using the logic of Aristotle, empiricism of Franciscan theologian Roger Bacon, the theology of Aquinas, he endeavors on his work. His reading glass symbolizes skepticism and the advancement of technology in fourteenth-century Italy. They are stolen by one of the characters in the latter part of the novel with an intention that William fails in his attempt to unravel the entire murder scene.

The abbot of the abbey, Abo of Fossonova appeals William to solve the mystery of the murder of Adelmo of Otranto who illustrated the manuscripts in the scriptorium. Adelmo fell from the Aedificium and died. The windows of the Aedificium being closed makes it unclear whether he attempted suicide or was murdered. There is a labyrinthine library in the top floor of the Aedificium which is prohibited for all the monks except the librarian. But the abbot permits William to go into the library. The library contains forbidden books since centuries and the layers are kept in secrecy. There are books from multitudinous cultures and traditions. The library also contains books containing falsehoods because "not all truths are for all ears" and "not all falsehoods can be recognized as such" (Eco 21). The monks from various regions of the world come to copy and translate the manuscripts.

The door of the church suggests a conglomeration of signs. Adso examines the church door as carved on the one hand with Biblical figures and on the other hand it is engraved with diabolical figures as a “voluptuous woman... gnawed by foul toads,” “proud man” and monsters from “Satan’s bestiary”. Adso is frightened by these figures and feels that “the vision was speaking precisely of what was happening in the abbey” (Eco 25).

Ubertino of Casale, a Franciscan takes refuge in the abbey due to his antithetical views that made him in opposition with the Pope. He supports poverty, abandonment of the materialistic world and preaching of free love. Fra Ubertino of Casale is a leader of Spiritual movement. He is a Franciscan and his position puts him in odd with the Pope. He values wealth and power. This character is an allusion to real life figure Ubertino who is the author of *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae*. He shared the views of the twelfth-century apocalyptic thinker, Joachim da Floris. William says, “... with whom they shared the same professed reverence for Joachim of Calabria,” the abbot persisted, “and you can ask your brother Ubertino” (Eco 94). Presently, he is in exile in the abbey. He persuades the people to join the heretical movements. Ubertino is parody on Frantz Fanon, Jean Paul Sartre of the sixties who were non-conformists and revolted against the existing norms.

For the *Aedificium*, Eco makes a historical reference to the thirteenth-century castle, Castel del Monte in Apulia. The library is more like a prison of knowledge where thousands of books are stockpiled since centuries as it is uttered by the abbot: “If God has now given our order a mission, it is to oppose this race to the abyss, by preserving, repeating, and defending the treasure of wisdom our fathers entrusted to us” (Eco 8). It is constructed in a maze-like structure with branching staircases. These labyrinths hint at the flooring patterns of medieval churches.

In the view of Felix Guattari and Giles Deleuze, the library is like a Rhizome. It is a concept developed in the book *A Thousand Plateaus*. The Rhizome connects one point to any other point but its roots are nontraceable. “The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (Guattari and Deleuze 12). It has neither a beginning nor an end but has a middle from which it starts. The action always starts in the ‘*medias res*’ and it has no ending. Similarly, the library has a structure which cannot be traced. It is a complex structure with irregular network of passages in which it is difficult to find one’s way out of the library. In *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Eco delineates the features of a rhizomatic text as, “the rhizome is multidimensionally complicated [---] in a structure in which every node can be connected with every node, there is also the possibility of contradictory inference” (Eco 83). He says that knowledge is not a permanent entity rather it holds code with it in a rhizomatic structure for deciphering the codes. It does not arrive at the conclusion directly but leaves a chain of inferences.

It foreshadows liminality i.e., an in-between space in the views of Charles Jencks. He regards the postmodern as being in the shape of a Chinese garden:

Post-Modern, like Chinese garden space, suspends the clear, final ordering of events for a labyrinthine, rambling ‘way’ that never reaches an absolute goal. The Chinese garden crystallises a ‘liminal’ or in-between space that mediates between pairs of antinomies, the Land of the Immortals and the world of society being the most obvious mediation. It suspends normal categories of time and space, social and rational categories which are built up in everyday architecture and behavior, to become “irrational” or quite literally impossible to figure out. (qtd. in McHale 158)

Eco supplicates his metaphor for the library in the following words: “Like a large labyrinth garden, a work for art permits one to take many different routes, whose number is increased by the crisscross of its path” (Eco 24).

Innumerable untold secrets lie beneath the surface of the library. William and Adso converse with the unrelenting librarian, Malachi. Malachi is aware of the deeper secrets of the library. They also confront the venerable and blind Jorge of Burgos whose ideas on demerits of acquiring excessive knowledge and learning echo in the abbey. William and Borges discuss and arise on a conflict on the subversive power of laughter.

Venantius of Salvemec is found dead on the second day in a tank of pig’s blood. William concludes that the dead body was towed from the library so both William and Adso go to investigate the library. They try to pierce the intense secrets of the library by going through the books. They search the books and examine the way they are arranged in the shelf. They come to know that there is a secret room known as ‘finis Africae’ in the library about which few people are aware. Benno of Uppsala, a monk trained in rhetoric discloses that the librarian Malachi and the assistant librarian Berengar of Arundel had a homosexual relationship. But Berengar tried to seduce Adelmo on the day of his death. He asserts that Jorge and Venantius were apprised of this faux pas. He also posited that a few days ago an argument took place about laughter. Venantius mentioned the lost book, Aristotle’s second book of *Poetics*, a treatise on Comedy which made both Malachi and Jorge furious. They both also became angry when Benno hinted at the model of African riddle of the fish in the book *Rhetoric* by Aristotle. Jorge denounced Aristotle’s idea of Africans as models. This made Venantius and Adelmo curious and they approached Berengar for a book named ‘the finis Africae’ or ‘the end of Africa’ in the library. On the third day, Berengar is found dead in a bath tub. Adso gives in to a sexual liaison with a young country girl. The abbey’s herbalist, Severinus of Sankt Wendel tells William that Venantius was poisoned. He goes to

the scriptorium to keep a check on what the monk was reading before he died. His desk was filled with all kinds of books except one which is the pointer to the murderer's identification. William and Adso search for the missing book but are in vain.

The supporters of both the Emperor and the Pope arrive at the abbey for a negotiation on who will hold the power. The Pope's inquisitor, Bernard Gui serves as a sharp contrast to William. Gui is cruel and fearful while William is wise and deals with reason. Gui is given the autocracy to solve the mystery of the abbey. He spreads terror wherever he goes. He remands the innocent country girl whom Adso loves. Gui makes the monks believe that she is a witch and is to be burned alive.

Gui, the inquisitor of the Pope is a Dominican Friar and a historian. He is the author of *Practica of icii inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*. Due to his fictionalized portrayals by Eco, he is among the most popular medieval detectives. In the novel, he is a failure as a detective. He arrests three innocent people and basks his talents nonetheless in front of everyone present in the abbey. He is assumed as William's foil. He is brutal and embraces heresy. "For years Bernard was the scourge of heretics in the Toulouse area" (Eco 133).

Remigio, the cellarer is put in trial by Bernard Gui for his previous heretical associations. He is threatened and confesses that he is the real murderer although in reality he is an innocent being. The next to be murdered is Severinus. Jorge preached his tormenting sermon that the last judgment is at hand and all are doomed sinners. Malachi dies falling on the floor after he attends the sermon.

William investigates by interrogating the new cellarer, Nicholas of Morimondo. He gets to know that the sole cause of enmity in the abbey is due to the chief post of the librarian. He also learns that the appointed librarian becomes the next abbot of the abbey.

This gives William a new insight into the murder scenes. But the abbot dismisses William because he fails to arrive at a certain conclusion.

William concludes by quoting the Austrian Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "One must cast away, as it were, the ladder, so that he may begin to ascend it", which means a detective must "so to speak, throw away the ladder" of his hierarchical logical construction, "after he has climbed up it" (Eco 74).

On the seventh day, William and Adso enter the secret room which is called 'finis Africae'. They see Jorge presiding there. At the end, all the mysteries are solved. Jorge is behind all the murders taking place in the library. He is governing the library since the last forty years. William attacks Jorge and asks him to leave the abbot who is his next victim. But the abbot dies in the staircase. William asks for the missing second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* which is a treatise on comedy. William's search for the book of Aristotle's *Poetics* is similar to Eco's search for Adso's manuscript in Paris. Perhaps, it is through the mirrored door that William enters the secret room and gets to know about the existence of the book while Eco is reassured of the book by reading Adso's lines quoted by Father Athanius Kircher.

The book is lost since centuries. It examines the merits of comedy and laughter. This is a brilliant example of Intertextuality where Eco generously refers to Greek Philosopher, Aristotle and his seminal work *Poetics*. It delves deep into the historical and fictional elements shrouding the enigmatic murders.

Jorge reveals the ground reality of the murders. He says that he has applied poison to the pages of the book. A reader has to lick his fingers to turn them and would kill himself by swallowing the poison. Jorge says that he has killed none. Berengar used the secret of 'finis Africae' and threatened Adelmo to sleep with him. Adelmo confesses his sins to Jorge and

commits suicide. The book is stolen by Venantius who tries to go through the book but he consumes the poison and dies. Berengar finds his dead body and places it in the tank of pig's blood in order to avoid any kind of exposure. He then ingresses the book and dies.

Eco draws a similarity between Jorge and Fyodor Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. Similar to the Grand Inquisitor who hypnotizes his co-characters' minds in order to keep them away from having access to excessive knowledge, Jorge also keeps the monks away from seeking worldly knowledge which he thinks would meddle with the word of God.

Malachi tries to bring the book from the infirmary. In the process of doing so, he confronts Severinus and murders him. Out of curiosity, Malachi tries to peruse the book and is also poisoned to death. Jorge says that all the monks were killed because of their unrepentant sins. Lastly, he plans for his own death. For keeping the book away from exposure, he tears the pages of the book and eats it. As stated by Jorge, the book is harmful and menacing. It eulogizes comedy to a heightened art form which holds the power and ability to tamper with truth, morality, society and religion. He states: "The spirit is serene only when it contemplates the truth and takes delight in good achieved, and truth and good are not to be laughed at. That is why Christ did not laugh. Laughter foments doubt" (Eco 83).

He further explains that Aristotle is subversive in the matters of comedy and laughter. He supersedes the image of God by placing science in the place of religion. His *Poetics* has also put comedy under a philosophical investigation. Previously, laughter was used for base entertainment but Aristotle elevates it to such a height in the art form. Jorge claims that he possesses truth of God and no power in this world is superior to God.

William and Adso try to stop him but Jorge throws a lamp and fire breaks out in the library. It seems as if "as if for centuries those ancient pages had been yearning for arson and were rejoicing in the sudden satisfaction of an immemorial thirst for ecpyrosis" (Eco 308).

Jorge hurls the book into the flames. The book is soon turned to ashes and is lost forever. Within no time, the whole abbey is burned down. William and Adso escape and bid adieu to each other. Years later, Adso visits the same abandoned abbey and collects scraps of burned pages from the library. He tries to find meanings from the rescued bits by going through them.

Referring to his work *The Role of the Reader*, Eco has distinctly employed two kinds of reader in the present novel: a naïve reader and a critical reader. Adso of Melk represents the naïve reader who only narrates the superficial details of the events but William is the critical reader. He is an astute observer and resolves the mystery with his shrewdness and sharp acumen. Both the naïve and the critical reader have their own judgments in the novel. Adso comes to the abbey in the company of William as a beginner, but at the end returns with a new taste of viewing things critically. Unlike Adso, William is a critical reader who learns that even at times critical readings may fail and it is wise to see the different sides of a single coin.

This Holmesian whodunit progresses on Rene Descartes' Cartesian concept that there is a structure and order in the cosmos that can be deciphered by a structured mind. It also draws upon Emmanuel Kant's track. Temporal distortion is vividly rendered in the novel as it jumps in time. There is always a shift from the medieval to the modern times. Eco explicitly refers to the middle ages and inadvertently records medievalism in his narrative with fictional overtones. Eco chooses a middle way in the narrative where he can keep the reader unsteady between a pastiche and a serious narrative.

Eco uses anachronistic elements to justify the act of attributing the novel to the middle ages. William states: "We are dwarfs . . . but dwarfs who stand on the shoulder of those giants, and small though we are, we sometimes manage to see farther on the horizon than

they" (Eco 86). This statement is accorded to Sir Isaac Newton of the seventeenth-century. This quotation also traces back to Robert K. Merton's book, *On the Shoulders of Giants*. Eco even stresses upon the fact that his detective has read Bernard of Chartres.

There is also a special reference to Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s. Adso quotes few lines while referring to the origin of Salvatore:

So, I believe that even my master, when he spoke of the simple, was using a rather simple concept. But unquestionably Salvatore was simple. He came from a rural land that for centuries had been subjected to famine and the arrogance of the feudal lords. (Eco 118)

With reference to the psychologist Sigmund Freud, William makes an allusion:

We already have so many truths in our possession that if the day came when someone insisted on deriving a truth even from our dreams, then the day of the Antichrist would truly be at hand. And yet, the more I think of your dream, the more revealing it seems to me. Perhaps not to you, but to me. Forgive me if I use your dream in order to work out my hypotheses; I know, it is a base action, it should not be done. ... But I believe that your sleeping soul understood more things than I have in six days, and awake. (Eco 280)

According to Freud, dream shows the path of understanding the unconscious. By examining the symbol and imagery of the dreams the repressed desires can be known. William tries to interpret the dreams in order to understand the unconscious mind of an accused.

In interplay between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries, the Black Death or the Peasants' Revolt stands as an atomic holocaust. This retrospection of Adso pronounces the impending doom that is most probable.

At the end, Adso as an old man preparing for his death leaves his manuscript for the readers. He has sustained this manuscript and the pages and has “often consulted them like an oracle” (Eco 317). He addresses the reader and says that he is not sure of the meaning that the text possesses. He further adds that the novel will not provide any conclusion but only unsolved questions. The readers discern:

An abstract model of conjecturality is the labyrinth. But there are three kinds of labyrinths. One is the Greek, the labyrinth of Theseus. This kind does not allow anyone to get lost: you go in, arrive at the center, and then from the center you reach the exit. . . . Then there is the mannerist maze: if you unravel it, you find in your hands a kind of tree, a structure with roots, with many blind alleys. . . . And finally, there is the net, or, rather, what Deleuze and Guattari call “rhizome.” The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space. The labyrinth of my library is still a mannerist labyrinth, but the world in which William realizes he is living already has a rhizome structure: that is, it can be structured but is never structured definitively. (Eco 57–58)

The hypothesis is presented, tested and discarded. New clues are also developed. The ending turns the fragmented clues into a whole crime story. Although, the criminal confesses and takes his own life but the detective succeeds in unmasking the crime.

Eco applies Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction which roots on the idea that everything has a structure. This concept can be overtly applied to the present novel. In the sense, it follows a structure of a detective story. The murder scenes take place in the course of seven

days. It borrows “all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure” (qtd. in Redling 57).

Eco makes an intertextual use of the Prophecy of the Seven Angels of the Apocalypse. This series with the Seven Trumpets from the Book of Revelation (8:6 to 10:10) helps Eco to reach the real criminal, Jorge. Similar kind of patterns is evoked in various other detective fictions like, Agatha Christie’s *The ABC Murders*, where the murder is based on an alphabetical design; S.S. Van Dine’s *The Benson Murder Case*, where all the murders take place in a series of nursery rhymes.

The ultimate revelation is of course based on William’s logic and reasoning. He asserts:

I arrived at Jorge through an apocalyptic pattern that seemed to underlie all the crimes, and yet it was accidental. I arrived at Jorge seeking one criminal for all the crimes and we discovered that each crime was committed by a different person, or by no one. I arrived at Jorge pursuing the plan of a perverse and rational mind, and there was no plan, or rather Jorge himself was overcome by his own initial design and there began a sequence of causes, and concauses, and of causes contradicting one another, which proceeded on their own, creating relations that did not stem from any plan. Where is all my wisdom, then? I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe. (Eco 314)

## Conclusion

In all of the remarks, efforts made to make an extensive and explorative Metafictional study of the novel *The Name of the Rose* through the medium of referring to significant events from centuries has turned to be a successful endeavor. There is an overt use of various

techniques to distort reality in the process of alienating the reader to make his own reading of the text. This makes the text a jigsaw puzzle of signs, where one sign leads to another in the process of abandoning the conclusion.

## Works Cited

Atchity, Kenneth. "Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*: An Intriguing Detective Story".

<https://www.latimes.com/.../la-et-jc-name-of-the-rose-umbert-eco-20160219-story.html>. Feb 19, 2016.

Eco, Umberto. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*.

London: Macmillan. 1984, pp- 64, 83.

Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*.

Vintage Publishing. 1980. pp- 8-314.

Genette, Gerard. *Seuils*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987.

(Translated as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*,  
Cambridge: CUP. 1997, pp-1,2.

Guattari, Felix. and Giles Deleuze. *A Thousand Plateaus*.

1980, pp-12.

Jencks, Charles. *What is Postmodernism?*

London, Academy editions.

1986, pp- 2,7.

McCaffery, Larry. *The Metafictional Muse: The Work of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme and*

*William H. Gass* (Critical Essays in Modern Literature). 1982. pp- 48.

McHale, Brian. *Constructing postmodernism*.

1992, pp- 158.

Redling, Erik. "Speaking of Dialect": Translating Charles W. Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales*.

2006, pp- 57.