

Metafiction and the Self of the Author: Reading *Every Third Thought: A Novel in Five Seasons*

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Abstract

Metafiction attracts our attention towards the way a text is constructed. John Barth's fiction is epitome of postmodern metafiction and experimentation with the concept of author, writer, narrator and character. The research article is an analysis of how J. Barth appropriates all the conventions and traditions of writing and relates them to instinctual fear of death and love of life. In other words, we can say that the present novel is an in depth study of theory and practice of narratology and narrative theory which also focuses on how a story is narrated and text constructed. In addition to this, the main focus of the study is how Roland Barthes and M.H. Abrams' discourse about the life and death of the author has been furthered and challenged by John Barth.

Keywords: author, metafiction, narrator, ontology, trace

Introduction

Every Third Thought: A Novel in Five Seasons by John Barth is about a professor of creative writing whose name is George Newett and his wife Amanda Todd who is a poet. Newett is self-conscious about his being as the writer, narrator and character of the story of the novel that tells us that he lives with his wife Amanda Todd. They live in a cramped rental house and discuss

about their Heron Bay Estates home which is also the subject of another novel *The Development* by J. Barth wherein the description of the Estates has been given in detail.

The story takes place in the memory of the protagonists of the novel. From the very beginning of the novel, the text seems to be about memories of the memories of the past. This means that the text engages with the memories that, sometimes self-consciously, wistfully and forgetfully refer to themselves in radically different ways. There is a perfect synergy between novelty and repletion. The Title of the novel also draws from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. This result in a sense of timelessness which engulfs the whole text that, however, takes on the form of interspersed tissues of memories and experiences wrought together without any separate identity. But, at times the narrator is aware of the fact that he is repeatedly participating in the stories and narratives of his past and he cannot escape the inevitability such a destiny. The text of the novel also makes a number of references of literary works by other writers, from classical to the present times, also repeating their content, styles and structures of writing and storytelling. Like Prospero in Shakespeare's play, George also weaves the magic web of narratives doing nothing but imitating all the previous styles of writing from the time of *Genesis* till date with the sole purpose to seem new and survive. Towards the end of the novel, the writer hints that he cannot escape deferring death through writing until he is mortal.

Metafiction is defined as a form of writing especially fiction that as a text attracts the attention of the reader towards its own constructedness. It recurrently reminds the readers to be aware of the fact that they are viewing or reading a fictional work. Such works remain self-conscious about language, genre, form and style of storytelling, drawing attention towards themselves as artifacts. Such a type of writing acts as a tool to undermine and parody literary conventions, unraveling the relationship between literature and reality, life, and art (Waugh 2).

Narratological analysis studies how a text is written or a story is told. Its main focus is on 'how' of a text/story and it has little to do with the content or meaning of the stories. In the article the same method of analysis will be applied in the context of how the novel is 'written' also considering it as a substitute for narration. In a way, it can be claimed that, narratology of writing does not at all worry about the story being told. Some postmodern scholars call it as death of the story or novel. The article studies the art of writing in its various forms and facets, underlining the material, philosophical, and ontological issues that the concept of writing

contains within it. Writing has been used by Barth as a tool to defy death and become immortal. Writing is not representing rather it is perpetuation of life by continuously postponing death, defying self annihilation and imagining the existence of self beyond all those narratives of it that have existed till date.

The most popular post-structuralist text “The Death of the Author” by Roland Barthes claims that it is the writer that writes and not the author. Perhaps, Roland Barthes is the first literary critic to formally talk about the ontology of writing and the production of text. For him, writing exists in its own right, not as a binary of speech or narration but as a unique and different possibility of multiple readings and interpretations. The writing is just like a participation in the ritual of ‘scribbling’ as John Barth calls it in his *The Friday Book* to depict what ‘speech’ or narration can’t represent. He used the phrase that ‘writing is the destruction of every voice’ (142). Writing is made possible by the pre-existing ideals of writing and traditions of it. Writing is the very silence, the zero degree, which contains within it the alpha and the omega-the beginning and the end. John Barth also uses the same concept of writing not as a means to achieve an end rather as an end in itself, reflecting its own abyss.

The novel, *Every Third Thought: A novel in Five Seasons*, develops a concept of writing wherein the living author remains constantly present as the one who experiences as a guarantor of what he writes and inherits from his predecessors. His art of writing is marked by the erasure of the distinctions among the writer, the author and the narrator. It is not clear, when the author knows that he is inventing stories just to live them and escape death, what is that which makes the author desire life which is seemingly a blatant lie lived repeatedly to make it seem as real. The always remains an immediate possibility and life depends on chances granted by evasions, excuses, false narratives, meanings, hopes. Bath’s way of writing, as an illustration of the way humankind constructs stories, meanings and lives them, becomes a mode of strategies used by human beings to come to terms with eschatological issues of death, destruction, finality and a big Nothing. His fiction draws upon characters that are self-conscious of themselves as writers, narrators, witnesses of the meta-fictional stories and their meta-fictional content. The narrator use writing and language as metaphor for procreating and postponing life by inventing stories about it and living them. This act of writing parallels the aims, ambitions and roles that society, religion and traditions set for everyone and which man follows unconsciously and makes meaning of his

existence. In the meta-fictional world of John Barth, the characters write and narrate to defeat death by creating meanings. In the process they manage to achieve not immortality, but existence, though on the pages of book only. And those who fail to do so fall off the edges of the narrative into the void surrounding the fictional level of reality. Barth reduces everything, in the entire world, to an act of writing and narration and using them as a means of survival. Barth can be called as a postmodernist with a difference because he, like Roland Barthes, does not question the authority of the author. He rather puts the author, the writer, the narrator as well as the narratee on the same level, erasing the hierarchies and distinctions between them.

Poststructuralist turn in narrative and writing transformed American Art and Literature: “techniques grew random, styles mixed and merged, [and] methods became increasingly provisional” (Bradbury 65). Derridian scholars call deconstruction as a mode of reading text, but there are writers in the postmodern phases who use deconstructive methods as a very basis of writing to show how texts are conceived, produced, processed, written and interpreted. Postmodernism is a dominant discourse of reading and interpretation, concentrating on the multiplicity of meanings. It renders interpretation and meaning making as a chaotic process wherein perspectives class and counter each other.

Deconstruction undermines such absolutes and renders them as unreliable. It challenges any form of certainty concerning the foundations of the universe, its destiny and meaning. Postmodern deconstructionist discourse creates innumerable possibilities, adopting a skeptical look towards all existing beliefs about cosmos as “ticked out by the measure of one universal clock” (Strehle 129). In the present era, everything is constantly changing and taking on new forms. This era is marked by Einstein’s theory of Relativity and Heisenberg’s theory of Uncertainty which have gradually eroded the reliability of grand narratives. It has further made the enquiry about the final truth more complex and shaken the very foundations of main centers of reference. It even goes to the extent of celebrating the meaninglessness as there is no meaning. It seeks celebrations and integrations. These results into a unique postmodern condition where all canters/frames of meaning and reference are rendered as relative and relational existing with a structure, having no given or preordained essence and meaning. This further leads to the fall of the author’s empire as a sole source of the meaning and interpretation of text. It resists authorial omniscience, individuality, and any intrinsic and inherent sense of closure and finality. This

resulting world with no centre, where there is nothing resolute, reminds us of Lacan's "notion of the loss of the subject and all the alienations of self-consciousness" (Bowen 70) tacitly signifying the diminishing of the one's sense of selfhood and, at the most fundamental level, of the finitude of one's existence in a world in which the dominant (postmodern) discourse "speaks man rather than the reverse" (70). It shows the futility of man's desire for meaning and identity engulfing him in an atmosphere with a deepest sense of "existential despair, a sense of man at road's end, with nowhere to go. This aporia of moral and ethical zilch leaves one alone, depressed and on the verge of breakdown, paralyzed and on the verge of suicide, forcing the individuals "to either put themselves in motion or to force death to give way to life" (Lehan 172).

As a consequence of such a complex and irresolute phenomenon, social absurdness and inherent sense of discord along with breakdown of existing epistemic and ontological certainties inspire a sense of abysmal end- as a characteristic of finality, futility, pointlessness, and disjunction in the very heart and mind of universal man. This condition of postmodern psyche gives birth and feeds off self-annihilating existentialism. Man, being conscious of such a reality, thinks about death as an immediate presence and also forcing him to think about his "mortality and devising strategies for coping with their consciousness" (Leclair 6). Man ultimately gets trapped in thoughts of death and doom, implicating "a contractive end, or a final and ultimate denial of the future rather than a way to some futurity or immortality" (7). In postmodern representation, there is a rush of fictional narratives with postmodern frame of reference towards epistemology and ontology, portraying an obsessively engaging picture of the play of death and awareness of the characters of their impending doom. Such an angst and annihilation of self informs the thematic structures of such postmodern narrative fiction. Such a fiction primarily prospers because of its characters suffering on account of or involvement with their inescapable and preordained death.

Marjorie Worthington has claimed about such a postmodern scenario that "in the face of postmodern indeterminacy, interpretive authority no longer resides with authors, and singularity of meaning no longer exists" (115). In these kind of postmodern narratives, the text constructs space represented by Mobius strip i.e., marked by "a nonlocus, a hole, a loss, the absence of a center or subject, a labyrinth, a universe of discourse when an infinite number of sign substitutions come into play, where nothing contains everything, and when a gap constitutes the subject" (138). For characters as well as the readers, the search for reality and identity becomes

an elusive subject-altogether, misguiding and chimerical, exactly as the art of narration itself. John Barth renders contemporary man's everlasting involvement with their thoughts and illusions of ultimacy and death, and the ever changing and innovative strategies and tactics of survival in order to surpass, defeat and deny diminishing of the self.

John Barth is fictionist and literary theoretician and breaks the familiar grounds of narrative tradition and fiction writing, rooting their origins in the literature of the past. In his fiction, he is concerned not only with what his characters experience but also what he himself faces as a writer and an author. He defies the position taken by Roland Barthes in his "Death of the Author" and struggles to maintain his prestige and primacy of authorial self with which he is obsessed and instead of challenging the primacy of authorship, his "metafictional experiments serve to cement the author into a position of authority over the text" (Worthington 1). His obsession with narrative experimentation embeds within it the human fear of death and love of life which is evident from the narratives of the characters trapped in such situations. James Rother, in this context claims that during these postmodern times "the end isn't near, it's already upon us" (23). He also considers such a situation as apocalyptic as Puritan Thomas Beverly had already "set the date of the Apocalypse for 1697, published a book in 1698 saying that the world had ended on schedule but no one had noticed it".

Conclusion

The novel does not tell any specific story. Its main concern is to discuss the narrative of narratology i.e., how the story is narrated and constructed. Its belligerent use of metafictional style of writing makes the novel a critical in terms of how different conventions and styles of writing and telling stories culminate into it. Herein, John Barth interrogates the concept of writer and scripter given by Roland Barthes and at the same time radicalises M. H. Abrams' defense of the biographical and historical criticism without naming it. John Barth, however, erases the distinction between author, narrator and character.

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