

Postmodernism in Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread*: A Study of Narrative Style and Techniques

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Abstract

The writings which started emerging in almost all literary genres during the second half of the twentieth century, especially fiction during and after the 1980s, have been constantly referred to as 'postmodernist'. In a sense, postmodernism in literature is different or even a reaction against 'modernism' and in another sense it is merely a continuation and extension of the latter but both can be said to have been largely influenced in their narrative modes from the avant-garde cultural and artistic movements started in the first half of the twentieth century. There may be differences between the attitude and tone of modernist and postmodernist literature but there are striking resemblances in their employment of narrative devices. That is why, those narrative devices are sometimes referred to as modernist and at other times as postmodernist. The present paper is a study of such narrative strategies and techniques in reference to Raj Kamal Jha's debut novel, *The Blue Bedspread: A Novel* (1999).

Keywords: Discontinuous narrative; Fragmentation; Postmodernist; Self-reflexivity.

Since the publication of Salman Rushdie's much critically acclaimed *Midnight's Children* (1981), Indian English fiction entered a new era of literary expression which is now commonly known as postmodernism (Mee 358). The term 'postmodernism' is a much debated and much defined term which still lacks any clear cut definitions, probably because it is inherent in the nature and scope of the term itself, that it always belies any clearly demarcated boundaries of definition in critical and theoretical discourses. Debates and discourses have also been made about the temporal and spatial existence of postmodernism, that is to say, when and where this phenomenon had been first perceived in literary writings and whether it has ended or still continues. Besides, its many theories, many ideas and many varied terms, there are some narrative techniques, particularly in fiction

writing which are labelled as postmodernist and they are equally found in modernist literature as well.

Andreas Huyssen commented humorously on this phenomenon as “one critic’s postmodernism is another critic’s modernism (or variant thereof)” (qtd. in Hawthorn 211). One way of understanding the phenomenon of ‘postmodernism’ in contemporary fiction is that it is not the exclusive novelty and originality in narrative modes which are referred to as ‘postmodernist’, as the narrative techniques and devices called postmodernist had already started showing their evolution from the time of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) and even much before (Parui 1). But it is their intensive superabundance and variety found mainly in contemporary fiction which is often termed as postmodernist. Though postmodernism is a Western artistic, literary and cultural phenomenon, its impact has been transnational and transcontinental to an extent that contemporary world literature has been largely influenced by its theoretical and technical aspects. Similarly contemporary Indian English writing has been influenced by it too.

The emergence of postmodernist Indian English novel is nothing less than a miracle and its growth is beyond all bounds of restriction. Its emergence is a miracle in the sense that the Indian English novel received a greater limelight and enthusiastic reception and profusion in the quantity of publication so much so that only in the first decade of the twenty-first century more than 400 novels were published (Batra, Preface). This is not to say that writers of previous generation like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, G.V. Desani, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Anita Desai and many others did not receive any critical attention abroad. In fact, Indian English fiction became known to the west through their works. To top it all, Desani is a novelist whose “inventive avant-garde novel, *All About H. Hatterr* (1948)” is undoubtedly a founding text of Indian postmodernist fiction (“Desani, G.V.” 288). Nevertheless, the new writers who began their writing careers in the recent decades have become worthy heirs to the heritage of Indian English fiction cultivated by their forerunners. To name a few, writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Vikram Chandra, Rukun Advani, Mukul Kesavan, Githa Hariharan, Kiran Nagarkar and many more have been producing fine literary novels in the present age. Postmodernism is reflected in the approach of these writers in that they like the inclusion of greater variety and pluralism in their writings as is their conviction that “Indian ‘tang’ is not a pure essence but the masala mix of a culture that has always been able to appropriate influences from outside the subcon-

minent" (Mee 360).

Earlier Indian writers were more concerned with the burden of representing India in its true colours as well as showing themselves as Indians while writing in the recently left coloniser's language, contemporary writers are more cosmopolitan in their themes and techniques – while writing about India –which makes them postmodernist. This new Indian English novel is concerned with "certain postmodern playfulness, the turn to history, a new exuberance of language, the reinvention of allegory, the sexual frankness, even the prominent references to Bollywood" and all these experimental elements entered the Indian English fiction largely through Rushdie's influence (Mee 358). Experimentation in the selection of narrative subjects and form of the novel is conspicuously visible in the works of many celebrated authors like Arundhati Roy whose *The God of Small Things* (1997) has been hailed for being an "unconventional text by Indian standards" for it, in "fractured time" frames deals with polemical issues like non-conformity in sexual choices that the characters in this novel make (Nelson 220). Both Rushdie and Roy are expert wordsmiths for they are known for "neologisms and linguistic wordplay" in their novels (Rastogi 116). Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) is also an extraordinary feat of linguistic innovation. I. Allan Sealy and Shashi Tharoor's fiction writing is also loaded with "linguistic play" and Vikram Chandra writes in a "flamboyant manner" while Mukul Kesavan has shown the postmodernist trait of "fabulation" in his novels (Rushdie and West xxi-xxii).

While this new Indian English fiction has addressed the contemporary issues like colonialism, culture, social and psychological issues of Indian diaspora, the impact of rising consumerism and globalization in Indian society, its latest preoccupation in the twenty-first century has also been the portrayal of murky realism, a subject picked up by Raj Kamal Jha. Beginning with his much critically appreciated *The Blue Bedsread* (1999) Raj Kamal Jha has written novel after novel showing his prowess of being capable of writing literary fiction. His other four novels are *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003), *Fireproof* (2006), *She Will Build Him a City* (2015), and *The City and the Sea* (2019). He has been hailed for the simplicity of language in his prose style which is nevertheless, in the words of Neel Mukherjee, marked by "lucid lyrical grace" (qtd. in *She Will Build Him a City*, book cover). As is the case of his contemporaries like Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, Suketu Mehta, Jha writes about "the gritty reality of daily life" (Rastogi 117).

Among the themes and subjects of his novels are the conditions of the different sections of Indian society mainly, the poor and the middle

class in urban and suburban spaces for “it is the world of... middle class which provides the most obvious context for the new Indian writing in English” (Mee 359). This phenomenon of registering the bleak realities of the urban spaces in the twenty-first century India has been termed as “new urban realism” (A. Singh 6). Children and vulnerable individuals and groups like religious and ethnic minorities occupy a prominent space in his novels. For the portrayal of stark realism in his novels he has been called “an Indian Raymond Carver” (*The Independent on Sunday*). *The Blue Bedspread*, Raj Kamal Jha’s first novel, won him much critical acclaim by bagging him the ‘commonwealth writers prize for best first book’ from the ‘Eurasia’ region for the year 2000 (Shukla 108). Its major themes are “incest” (Shukla 109) – a subject also depicted by Roy in her *The God of Small Things* – and “domestic violence” (Rastogi 116). The taboo issues and themes as well as narrative style and techniques used in the novel make it a postmodernist novel. The scope of this paper is to exclusively analyze the postmodernist narrative style and techniques in the novel chosen for textual study.

The Blue Bedspread is a postmodernist fiction, as while reading one can notice the narrative tendencies and characteristics of postmodernist fiction present in it. Such narrative tendencies and modes have been defined and classified under various theoretical concepts and terms such as “metafiction” (Woods 70), “surfiction”, “fabulation” (Hawthorn 219), etc. It is very difficult to sum up these terms in few lines in clearly demarcated boundaries of definitions because all efforts to define them lead to more or less the same or over-lapping descriptions as Susana Onega and José Ángel García Landa explain in reference to “Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980)” (Hawthorn 208):

Hutcheon’s narcissistic narrative is more or less equivalent to such terms as Robert Scholes’s ‘fabulation’, William H. Gass’s ‘metafiction’, Raymond Federman’s surfiction’ and Ronald Binn’s ‘anti-novel’, all of which were coined to account for the widespread tendency to introversion and self-referentiality of much post-modernist fiction. (qtd. in Hawthorn 208)

It implies that the least satisfying crux of these terms is that the postmodernist fiction or “contemporary fiction” (Eaglestone: 2013) is a kind of fiction which attracts attention towards its own status as fiction, that is to say, the narrator often slides in the narrative and every now and then holds on the actual line of the narrative and deviates it to the point of commenting on it freely and discussing his narrative strategies with the reader. The narrative strategies and techniques which are normally found in

a modernist/ postmodernist novel are self-reflexivity (Woods 63), adoption of magic realism (Cuddon 690; Das 69), blurring of genres, discontinuous narrative, fragmentation, (Barry 79, 81), fantasy ("postmodernism" 797), contradiction, excess in narration (David Lodge, qtd. in Hawthorn 216-17), playfulness in both language and narration, unreliability in narration (Abrams and Harpham 228, 304), and open-ended narratives ("modernism" 674), etc.

In postmodernist fiction, excess lies in narrative digressions so much so that it is the digressions which capture the thematic foregrounding along with the principal narrative focus. Vikram Chandra's novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), rambles into "epic digressions, fantastic events" and depicts "an India which is constructed of endless narrative" (Mee 370). Likewise, *The Blue Bedspread* comprises digressions galore. An instance of excess in narration is conspicuously visible in the beginning of the novel where the unnamed narrator of this novel devotes almost a page on simply telling the reader about his trousers. This is how the narrative starts lingering on:

There is something wrong with my trousers. The waist, where the loops for the belt are, folds over every time, so if you look at me carefully while I am walking by, on the street or at the bus stop, you will see a flash of white, the cloth they use as lining, running above my belt, peeping out. (*Blue Bedspread* 1)

Narrative excess is also seen in lines such as:

People talk in laughs, think in smiles, and for that moment, even if it lasts only one second or one minute, there's happiness spread all around, like chocolates. You can take as much as you want, stuff your pencil box, squeeze some into the hole of your sharpener, even between the pages of your textbooks. And there will be lots left. Some will stick to the walls, the furniture, some will fall under the bed, in those corners where your eyes never reach so that when the moment has passed all you need to do is to search in the right places, keep your ears open for the rustle of the chocolate's wrapping paper, your nails overgrown, so that when you have to chip it off the walls, you can. This is the story of one such moment. (65-66)

Instead of saying straight in plain prose that the whole household was filled with happiness when Sunil Gavaskar was scoring runs, we have a barrage of sentences expressing the child's peculiar sense of happiness mixed with his strange imagination in a family gathering. There is a use of

simile here in which the happiness felt by the child in a family gathering has been compared with the same amount of happiness felt by children in their fondness for chocolates. But the extended simile here is an example of what David Lodge says in reference to postmodernist fiction, “[taking] metaphoric or metonymic devices to excess” (qtd. in Hawthorn 217).

In a traditional fiction which is devoid of any experimentation the narrator’s word is the universally accepted version bearing verisimilitude as the only source of reality. In this sense the narrator has hitherto been perceived as a reliable storyteller. But in the case of postmodernist fiction the fallibility/ unreliability of the narrator is a matter of attention for reading and interpretive processes. An unreliable narrator is one whose “perceptions, interpretations” and opinions about the events in the narrative do not bear resemblance with what the author “implies” to share with the “alert reader” (Abrams and Harpham 304-5).

Unreliability in narration gives rise to problematization in narrative and interpretive processes with the result that conflict and confusion arise between what the author implies to convey and what the reader makes out of the text. One of the principal themes of this novel is domestic violence. The domestic violence shown in the novel is inflicted by narrator’s father at his mother. But it is kept secret until the story “Garden Child” is told “Father beats mother” (51). Before it the narrator tells the reader only that a man upstairs beats his wife “the man beating his wife in the upstairs flat” (5), while from this information the reader has already formed the opinion that the man and his wife must be narrator’s neighbours who live upstairs. It is only after reading many pages that the reader comes to know that the man and his wife are narrator’s parents. This is unreliability in narration which creates a suspicion and confusion in the minds of readers. This unreliability in narration is further foregrounded just after an incident of domestic violence in which the narrator interrupts the narrative and says “I could tell you more about the child, more about that night, what happened when the child returned to his room” (52).

The narrator hints at throwing further light on his own childhood and the domestic violence inflicted by his father at his mother which was witnessed by him. While having hinted at telling the readers the full story so that the readers may come to know the reason behind the violence, the narrator does not tell it but lingers it on. For many pages and then only vaguely hints about it that the man at whom his mother was waving one day wasn’t his father: “And all I remember is my hand resting on her head, my fingers on the red vermilion in the parting of her hair. And that

the man across the street wasn't my father" (82). To the utter surprise of the reader, this is not the conclusion that the reason of domestic violence was the infidelity of narrator's mother because the way random moments scattered in the narrative showing father and mother coming close to each other romantically, even in a case when the act of domestic violence just occurred, makes it suspicious and mysterious that the narrator's mother had illicit relations with someone else. Things such as these create a sense of unreliability in narration and what we have as conclusion is only ambiguity. This is also an example of "discontinuous narrative" in that the story of domestic violence is mysteriously left fragmented. Unreliability in narration is also highlighted in the statement "At a different time, may be at a different place, I would have told you other stories" which raises the question; whether the stories the narrator is narrating at the moment are true or mere stories like the ones he intends to manufacture/ tell according to a different place and time and probably the stories are all manufactured merely at his whim as the narrator himself asserts on the same page "I would have twisted fact, fleshed out fiction" (47).

Discrepancies between reality and representation arise because of self-conscious narrative mode found in a "self-reflexive novel or involuted novel" (Abrams and Harpham 304). A self-reflexive or involuted novel is one in which a constant self-consciousness about the fictionality of the narrative is present. A self-reflexive novel always refers back to its writing and interpretive processes employed by the writer as well as the difficulties in writing faced by him/ her. It also comprises free comments by the writer on the very fiction that he/ she is writing. For instance, both in *Midnight's Children* and Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama* the narrative is fractured and attention is drawn to the process of telling (Mee 368). An instance of "self-reflexivity" in *The Blue Bedspread* is seen when talking about his father the aerator interrupts the narrative and treats his father as a subject of his novelistic prose which underscores the fictional status of the novel itself: "Or as a subject of my prose. I want him to help me understand why he failed as a father and how could so much hatred and pain have gracefully coexisted with so much love and joy" (63).

By adding the phrase "Or as a subject of my prose", the narrator has mixed the trivial into a serious discourse by creating self-consciousness about the fictionality of the narrative in which he talks about his father's failure to become a good father. Self-reflexivity is also visible in the beginning of the story "Sarah Parker" in which the narrator once again interrupts the narrative and says to the baby "you have been crying for more than five paragraphs" (89). This is also an example of deviation in the usual collation found in the English language. One can cry for five minutes or

five hours, but how can one cry for five paragraphs. This piece of humour actually attracts attention to the fact that we are reading a novel. The title of the second last story and the beginning of the story are again self-reflexive in nature in that the title refers to itself as "Second-Last Story". It opens as: "The pen now rests on the paper, its job done, its nib catches the light from the table lamp, but it doesn't glint as it should. That's because it isn't so dark now, there is other light coming into the room, the first light of the sun, through the green window, its wooden slats, through the red curtains" (219). Again, "...and I was pulling the words out of the air in my room. Lining them up on my page", and "...now they are tired, each page sleeps covered by the other" (220). These lines suggest that the novel is approaching towards closure and the writer is openly commenting on the approaching closure which gives this novel a fictional status that again makes the readers conscious that they are reading a novel.

The narrative style of the novel is not only self-reflexive but also self-referential, i.e. the text in repeating the lines written earlier in another context refers to itself. For example the same description refers to the narrator in the beginning of the novel: "I am not a young man any more, I wear glasses, my stomach droops over the belt of my trousers." (1), while in the story "street crossing" again it refers to himself but from a distant perspective: "He may not be a young man, his stomach may droop over the belt of his trousers" (72). Yet another example of self-reflexivity is visible in the line "And remember, my child, your truth lies somewhere in between" (6) as the truth of the identity of the baby lies in the text in one line fragmented into eight words.

This novel is "a series of imagistic short stories" (Rastogi 115). Even the ordering of stories in non-linear as different stories have been juxtaposed with one another. In the absence of accurate sequential chronology among different stories and events wound together in the novel, stories and events "emerge and re-emerge" (Sharma 119). Discontinuity and fragmentation are observable in the fact that stories are told and retold, "I shall retell some stories" (5), and they are told in fragmented forms at various places. Mystery and riddles through discontinuous narrative have been created so effectively in the novel that stories are left halfway and they are either subject to completion later on in the novel or their completion depends on the discretion of the reader. For example the story of the dead child is a riddle which is left for the reader to solve. There is no finality in the narrative as the clues given in place of conclusions render the truth of this and such other stories in the novel, "provisional" status, the meaning of which has to be "jointly constructed by reader and writer" (Barry 35, 34). In the middle of the novel, we have the closing

event of the principal narrative:

A little later, a red handkerchief, folded neatly, falls from the terrace and halfway down a bit of it opens out, continues to fall, veering just a few inches from its path because of a light wind.

It comes to rest on the body, on his leg, inches above the knee and my sister walks down, free at last. There's a taxi waiting and she tells the driver to take her to what was once her home, in the neighbourhood where the pigeons lie sleeping in their cage. (138)

It is the closing event of the novel as after this incident the narrator's sister comes back to his brother and as a result of their incestuous relationship she conceives a baby and months later dies giving birth to her. Being the only living guardian of the baby, the narrator goes to the hospital to bring the baby home. One can see an example of fluidity in narrative events and time shifts that is, the past mingling into the present and vice versa when the narrator tries to divulge the secret of the actual identity of the baby girl and narrator's actual relationship with her. It takes a very long time for him to confess that he is the father of his sister's child. The old events of his childhood problem of stammering float into his present and it takes him two pages to speak a single line fragmented into eight words:

"I...am...the...father...of...my.....sister's...child" (226-27). The multiplicity of stories in *The Blue Bedspread*, which causes discontinuity and fragmentation in the narrative, also makes it pluralistic and "pluralism" (Has-san 503) in place of singularity is also a prominent feature of postmodernist fiction.

Open-ended narrative style or a narrative which provides the readers with alternative endings is also a style in vogue which has been much explored and frequently employed in postmodernist fiction. A prominent example is found in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) which "is notable for Fowles's extensive use of authorial commentary and for the alternative endings he provides" ("Fowles, John" 388). In *The Blue Bedspread* the story, "murder mystery" is an example of open-ended narrative in which alternative endings are given for the readers to draw their own conclusions. In this story the narrator's sister murders her husband by throwing him down from the terrace of their house. This story has alternative endings as in the one, the murder does not take place and the other one in which the murder takes place and the narrator's sister flees from the sight of the crime:

How should we end this story? We could have her go down to get him the second drink, hear the crackle as it hits the ice in the

steel glass, climb the stairs again and listen to him talk about the school, the child she couldn't give him.

Or we could end it like this:

She returns with the drink, he doesn't even hear her footsteps, he's looking out, far away, at the lights on Park Street and she walks closer towards him, the glass in her hand. She bends down, puts the glass on the terrace, she will need both hands, his back is turned, the first drink must have blunted his senses since he can't hear or feel that she is only two feet away. Suddenly there is a scream which no one will hear, a body, dressed in a white shirt and grey trousers, white socks and black shoes, falls into the lane which not many people use since it's more like a dumping ground, choked with garbage from the buildings nearby. (137)

Mise-en-abyme/ "mise en abyme" (Cuddon 513) has become "a favoured device in postmodernist fictions" (Baldick 212). The French writer André Gide coined this term by which he meant "an internal reduplication of a literary work or part of a work" (Baldick 211). It is like a frame placed within another frame. The effect of this technique is that a fiction is created within another fiction thus causing both regression and self-referentiality. For example, Édouard, the central character of Gide's novel *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*, 1926) "is a novelist working on" the same novel "in which he himself is a character" (Baldick 211). For such examples in literature, Mieke Bal has used the term "mirror-text" because "in verbal examples it is not the whole of the work which is mirrored but only a part" (Hawthorn 210). An instance of mise-en-abyme/ mirror-text can be observed in the fact that within the novel, *The Blue Bedspread*, there is an unnamed narrator who is writing stories for his one-day old baby girl and those stories form the text of the novel. Moreover, within the novel there is a story bearing the same title as of the novel except omitting the definite article, i.e. "Blue Bedspread" (55). This is a clear case of "internal reduplication". When the narrator says: "I could take you to my study, the room where I'm writing, and put you on the stack of pages that have been written" (90), he has literally put the child, i.e. its story woven into the text, on the stack of pages mentioned above. The narrator, who himself is the part of the 'stack of pages' is talking about putting the child on 'the stack of pages' that he is writing, and interestingly enough the reader is actually reading the novel in which the narrator is a character as well as the 'internal reduplication' of that novel, the stories written by the narrator in this case. In this way the reader also has to go through a process of double reading, i.e. reading a work of fiction written by a real author, in the

present case, Raj Kamal Jha and reading a work of an unnamed fictional narrator of *The Blue Bedspread*. This is another example of mise-en-abyme.

The Blue Bedspread is a postmodernist novel as far as its narrative style and techniques are concerned. The examples of postmodernist narrative strategies and techniques given above and their applicability on the text of the novel like, excess in narration, unreliability in narration, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, discontinuous narrative, open-ended narrative, and mise-en-abyme, successfully bring out the postmodernist characteristics of this novel.

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