

# Italo Calvino's Metafictional Romp in the World of Fiction in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*

Geetanjali Mahajan

## Abstract

In his 1967 essay, "Literature of Exhaustion", John Barth argued that the novel's era as a major art form has ended, as traditional methods of literary representation and their potential have been "used up" through overuse. He also proposed that one way to counter this is through Metafiction (writing fiction about fiction). The novelist, therefore, becomes a sort of a critic, writing a novel which imitates a novel rather than the "reality" of the world. In this paper, I critically discuss Italo Calvino's, *If on a Winter's Night, a Traveler* as a novel that overturns this predicament of exhausted potentialities into a source of renewed vitality by employing various metafictional techniques such as the use of frame tale (story within a story), fragmentation in plot and narrative, second-person narrative, use of pastiche etc. It may be argued that these experimental techniques outspread the limits of the novel into philosophical realms, and by thus deliberately and systematically highlighting fiction as an imaginative and artificial construct, they also affirm the poststructuralist view of the world as an artifice.

**Keywords:** Experimental techniques; Metafiction; Post-structural.

"It seems a country headed thing to say: that literature is language, that stories and the places and people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth or metal tubes" - William H Gass, *Fiction and Figures of Life*,

The essential human nature remains unchanging, but the forms of human behaviour must change with time to keep in touch with the essence of human nature. The substance or the ideas of fiction similarly remain unchanged as they pertain to the unchanging human nature, but the forms of fiction must change to keep up with the vital ideas of fiction. The nov-

el is a genre which has been successful in reflecting both the changing behavioural patterns as well as the evolution of fictional form through appropriate techniques. Mark Schorer has gone so far as to say that new techniques in fiction are what enable “a new subject matter and a greater one” (72) to be discovered. In his persuasive essay, “Technique as Discovery” Schorer says, “...not only that technique contains intellectual and moral implications, but that it discovers them” (72).

In the 1960s and 1970s many authors like Jorge Luis Borges, Umberto Eco, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon etc. reveled in subverting the literary traditions and experimenting with their fiction. They wanted to undermine the established literary conventions and sought to give literature qualities and characteristics that it did not have in the past. Indeed, in 1967, Robert Scholes reintroduced the term “fabulator” in the critical discourse to designate those writers who were experimenting with fictional forms and breaking with traditional storytelling methods and form of the novel through his book *Fabulation and Metafiction*. With the arrival of nuclear weapons and shocking horrors of second world war, it was believed that conventional forms of literature were no longer adequate and newer forms of literature was required to explore the sense of meaninglessness and helplessness experienced by human beings. Hence, there was a departure from many literary standards, a break from the rules and regulations of the canon, thus paving the way for many new genres.

This is also in consonance with what John Barth argues in his 1967 essay, “Literature of Exhaustion”. He suggested that the novel’s era as a major art form has ended, as traditional methods of literary representation and their potential have been “used up” through overuse. He also proposed that one way to counter this is through Metafiction (writing fiction about fiction). The novelist, therefore, becomes a sort of a critic, writing a novel which imitates a novel rather than the “reality” of the world.

In this paper, I critically discuss Italo Calvino’s, *If On a Winter’s Night, a Traveler* as a novel that overturns this predicament of exhausted potentialities into a source of renewed vitality by employing various metafictional techniques such as the use of frame tale (story within a story), fragmentation in plot and narrative, second-person narrative, use of pastiche etc. It may be argued that these experimental techniques outspread the limits of the novel into philosophical realms, and by thus methodically and deliberately drawing attention to fiction’s status as an invented and artificial construct, the postmodernist experience of the world as an artifice is also asserted.

*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is an avant-garde novel that intentionally deviates from the traditional narrative form, prompting reflection on both the limitations and possibilities of concept of narrative structure, such that the distinction between fiction and reality is blurred. The subject of Calvino in this novel is fiction – the making of fiction and the reading of fiction and therefore the objects or entities in his novel are readers, translators, students, professors, counterfeiterers, and critics.

The novel opens with a Male Reader who begins reading Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. However, he soon discovers that his copy is faulty, repeating only the first section. At the bookshop, he finds that the book he thought was by Calvino is actually by the Polish writer Bazakbal. He then chooses to explore the work of Bazakbal instead of Calvino's as does Ludmilla – a fellow reader who also had a problem with her copy of Calvino. Both embark on reading this new book (and later also develop a relationship based on their mutual love for reading) To their dismay, the novel turns out to be a completely different story, and just as the reader becomes engrossed, another binding error occurs. The narrative alternates between scenes of the reader's life and the fictional worlds he encounters, with each new book presenting its own cliffhanger or unresolved crisis.

The novel uses the technique of a framed narrative (telling of a tale within a tale). Hence, the overarching or the containing frame is formed by the numbered chapters which tell the story of the Male Reader and the Other Reader's quest for the elusive "authentic" novel and their most precarious adventures. These chapters are interspersed with the novelistic fragments that they are reading. However, because of a highly unlikely succession of mishaps and misadventures, these chapters are the openings of ten distinct books. The initial pages of the first book are duplicated throughout its entirety. In the second book, after the first chapter, there are two blank pages following every two printed pages. The author of the third book takes their own life. The fourth book is deliberately torn into fragments to be analyzed simultaneously by various study groups. The fifth book concludes abruptly, and the sixth book is stolen by someone who doesn't read, the seventh is stolen by UFO fanatics, the eighth is confiscated by the custom officials while the ninth one is mixed up by a computer. The author of the tenth book is arrested just as he is about to give it to the Reader.

The ten unrelated, interrupted chapters may be called "incipits" because they are supposed to be novels only at an incipient stage. Each of these novels are interrupted because of one reason or another and all the Readers are left with are ten incipits of the beginnings. These incipits form the

---

second "whole" and are contained within the story of the Reader and the Other Reader. The metafictional plot or the chapters of the framing narrative introduce and comment retrospectively on the ten incipient novels. To structure this metafictional plot, conventions of romantic melodrama and detective fiction are used.

The Male Reader in the book is a persistent seeker, relentlessly pursuing both the elusive Ludmilla and the endings to the ten story beginnings he encounters, hoping that "somewhere the complete volume must exist" (115). The pursuit of the authentic novel is paralleled to his pursuit of Ludmilla, as the object of his desire. As the Reader waits for the Other Reader in a café, his anticipation for the text he's reading becomes intertwined with his expectations for the woman: "you concentrate on your reading, trying to shift your expectation for her book to the book, as if hoping to see her come toward you from the pages" (140). But being a cynical reader that he is who no longer expects "anything of anything" (4), he continually fails and flaws. The Male Reader reads book in an almost detective-like manner, dissecting and investigating everything minutely. He hates being at the "mercy of the fortuitous, the aleatory, the random in things and human actions" (27). And, therefore, he obsessively tries to bring disorder and every chaotic element in his life under tight control. His expectations and desires regarding Ludmilla and the fragments he reads are constantly stirred, but the fulfillment of these desires is perpetually deferred. Hence, whether it is the novel that the Male Reader is trying to read or the world that he is trying to escape through his reading are both fragmentary, disconnected and uncertain.

The Other Reader, Ludmilla on the other hand, is the embodiment of an engaged reader - voracious, instinctive, uncritical. Her appetite for stories driven only by the author's "desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories, without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you" (92). The importance of Ludmilla as a reader is further dramatized by her sister Lotaria who is a programmed reading machine turning stories into computerized word lists. About Lotaria P.W. Beard says, "Ludmilla teaches the Male Reader that it is perfectly all right to be lost in adventure, not to complete a book, not to move forward but to move in circles through a maze of conflicting views of life". Thus, Ludmilla teaches the Male Reader to question his reading practices and indeed Ludmilla performs a significant part in the fiction-generating activity of the novel. It is her insatiable and varied appetite for books and more books that provides the stimulation as well as schema for each of the novel's fragments.

The ten incipits are a captivating miscellany. They are splendidly various, collected randomly and representing different styles and varied subgenres of the narrative tradition – spy, thriller, failed realism, melodrama, story of mystery and suspense, fantasia of mirrors, tale made by diary entries etc. Not only are the incipits of different genres, but they are also of different nationalities and languages – French, Polish, Japanese, and even three fictional languages – Cimmerian, Cimbran, Ircanie and so on. These narrative fragments are linked by an overlaying frame which is itself a mélange of letters, diary entries, tales of spying and political conspiracy, romance etc.

The ten stories or incipits contained in the novel need to be seen in the larger perspective of Calvino's notion of literature as a "combinatorial game" which he gives in his essay, "Cybernetics and Ghosts". According to Calvino, writing is merely a process of combining pre-existing elements. There are "unlimited combinations, permutations and transformations" which can be constructed based on the operations of narrative. Thus, if literature can only be seen as the permutations of a limited set of discrete variables or entities implied in its own material, then the ten incipits in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* are ten transformations or variants of one another. The constant metamorphosis of the original novel into one form after another permits Calvino to give samples of a whole range of different genres or writings from around the world. This is also akin to the concept of intertextuality given by Julia Kristeva in 1966, according to which no literary text is insular, rather it is made up of absorption, transformation, and transposition of other texts. Thus, each literary text is interdependent upon all those texts that have gone before it. Similarly, at the beginning of the story, there is always another narrative, another beginning. Calvino has even fictionalized this concept in the novel by invoking the mysterious figure of a blind storyteller, a mythical Father of Stories, "the universal source of narrative material, the primordial magma from which the individual manifestations of each writer develop" (117). Thus, this man becomes Calvino's fictional counterpart of the origin from which all stories emerge.

This may also be seen in the light of the metaphor of mirror which recurs again and again throughout the book, which also refers to how language can lead to infinite recursion. The text opens with the sentence "You are about to read Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's night a Traveler*". The title stands vicariously for the novel itself. In order to know what this invented reader is about to read we must replace the words 'If on a Winter's night a traveler' with the text they refer to. The mirror of the self-referential title

captures the image of the infinite text. The implication of the mirror metaphor is also investigated through the seventh incipit of the novel. This novel-snippet tells the story of a business tycoon obsessed with mirrors – “...every thinking activity implies mirrors for me” (161). Calvino even goes to the extent of having several ‘doubles’ of himself. Further, not only can a system of mirrors multiply an image to infinity, it is also important that mirrors image “distant and hidden things” even those that “remain out of eyeshot” (165).

One of the major objectives of the novel seems to be the destruction of all-seeing, all-powerful status that an author enjoys in conventional modes of literature. Calvino debunks the absolute authority of an author (and by extension, of any authority that could be invulnerable to surrounding disruptions and disorder) through many techniques such as including his own name in the text (as discussed earlier), by putting multiple images of himself in the text etc. Sure enough, there are two more author-characters in the frame story – Flannery and Marana. Like Calvino, Flannery aspires to write a book that is only an ‘incipit’. By articulating this desire of his, he incidentally also underlines the importance of deferring closure (achieved by multiplying the number of beginnings) which heightens the pleasure of the reader. Thus, Flannery writes in his book, “I would like to be able to write a book that is only an incipit, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning, the expectation still not focused on an object. But how could such a book be constructed? Would it break off after the first paragraph? Would the preliminaries be prolonged infinitely? Would it set the beginning of one tale inside another as in *The Arabian Nights*?” (177)

Marana is a translator, a forger, and an ex-lover of Ludmilla. Propelled by his insane jealousy of Ludmilla’s reading habits, he initiates a number of sub-plots in the novel by “sowing confusion among titles, author’s name, pseudonyms, languages, translation editions, jackets, title pages, chapter beginnings and ends...” (239). He dreams of “a literature made entirely of apocrypha, of false attribution, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiches” (159) – a novel quite like *If on a Winter’s Night a traveler*.

C. Nella Cotrupi asserts that the text of the novel is not just raised to the second degree, that of metafiction, but to a third degree (meta-metafiction) which she calls hypermetafiction. This is because the narrative text is not only marked by an awareness of itself as a literary and fictional enterprise but incorporates within itself the implications, issues, problems, and questions of the discourse of metafiction itself, thereby creating “a compli-

cated, multilayered semantically heterogeneous fictional universe" (281).

The hypermetafictional frame that is formed in this text is because of two factors: the role of the reader and two, the relationship between authorship and narration. In the book "You" is not the usual implied and absent reader outside the text. "You" is the reader-protagonist of the novel, familiarly addressed by the author in the second person. He is not merely a passive reader, but one who acts as a character within the text. Although, at first it seems that the narrative is directed toward an implied or a mock reader but to the confusion and consternation of any actual readers like us, "You", the Reader turns out to be the male protagonist of the novel and as much a fictional fabrication as any other character of the novel. What we get as a result of this play upon the notion of readers is "a diegetic parody of theories of implied readers" (Cotrupi 283).

The novel is articulated neither in the third person nor in the first person but in the intimate second person mode of present tense (as it is when someone is reading from an instruction manual). However, the second person narrative voice and the reader-protagonist are not on par. Moreover, sometimes there is an attempt to absorb the actual reader into the fictional world. The attempt to include into the fictional world the ontological void that exists between the actual and fictional world creates a second level of metafiction. The narrative voice in *If on a Winter's Night a traveler* is therefore neither extradiegetic, nor does it belong to the level which is occupied by the reader-characters of the novel – the Male Reader and the Other Reader. The narrator like the reader-protagonist is a "verbal construct" (Cotrupi 286).

Cotrupi's discussion of the novel recognizes three levels of narration in the novel – ten incipits, a metafictional plot with reader-protagonists, and a hypermetafictional level framing these levels and containing an invented author cum narrator and his synergetic partner, the tacit invented reader (287)

Hence, the book is a work of extreme self-reflexivity, a novel about the world of literary criticism and readership. In addition to extensively exploring the relationship between the writer and reader, reader and text, Calvino has woven many theoretical approaches of literary criticism into the plot by fictionalizing these theories. Salman Rushdie praised the novel as "the most outrageous fiction about fiction ever conceived". This extraordinarily original novel which almost redefined narrative technique is full of imitation, parody, pastiches of a complete set of modern and

postmodern literary techniques. P.W Beard's comment about the novel is pertinent here. He says, "The world of the word is in chaos. Never in one place very long, slipping in and out of time, multiplying plots as he does texts, Marana traps another woman, a Sultan's wife ("really" Ludmilla in another magical guise) into perpetual reading – a Sheherazade in reverse. For her, Marana plans to translate a novel, interrupt it into another, opening a sequence of irresistible books, enclosed in one another like a series of little Russian dolls – except that there is never a final "doll".

Certain metafictional metaphors, leitmotifs and themes recur in the text. A central motif is that of the vertigo which also represents the multiple plots and the convoluted structure of the novel. The metaphor vertigo is often evoked with reference to the process of writing or the world of fiction. Thus, Silas Flannery keeps "circling around the idea of an interdependence between the unwritten world and the book I should write" (172). Mr. Cavedagna has an "attack of vertigo" just thinking about the disorder and chaos that "billions of pages, lines, words" (98) will cause in his publishing house even if something slightly goes askew.

Another key metaphor, that of 'erasure' is found in at least three tales of the book – fifth, ninth and tenth. Erasure represents a strategy used by characters to reduce and to simplify their world to eliminate the disturbing complications in their lives, to negate their temporal existence. The fifth fragment features a character who unsuccessfully attempts to erase his past by repeatedly changing his jobs, his wife, city and even the continent. The character in the tenth tale, similarly, fantasizes everything that stands between him and his lady love. However, none of these characters are able to reach the ideal world that they hoped to achieve through the process of erasure, just as the Reader is unable achieve his ideal novel. Like, the Reader, these characters are reminded that multiplicity, chaos, and disorder are a part of being human and one should not even attempt at erasing them. This theme not only connects the tales of the inner narrative with each other, it also forms a link between the inner and the outer level.

Marana and Flannery, like Calvino, do not even pretend to write a single book that concatenates the whole truth. Instead, their desire is to write many books and many stories, many stories that have many stories with in them. Postmodernist thinkers generally held that there is no universal truth or profound meaning to life. Since all things are irrational and life or reality can only be understood in terms of disorder and discontinuity, they all try to express themselves through partial elements and plural



fragments. Sure enough, *If on a Winter's Night a traveler* is a book that depends for its total effect upon what we might call discontinuities and employs satire, unreliable narrators, metafiction, and fragmented structure to contest the reader's beliefs about both life and literature.

Conversely, the novel may also be seen as a fantasy with a pair of dream readers as characters, written because of nostalgia for the old modes of reading when there was no excessive analysis of how books are made and unmade.

Calvino's experiments with the narrative not only allow him to tell stories, but it also helps him to fictionalize his ideas and comment on the modern world. Thus, in the novel, while he makes keenly self-conscious reflections on the telling and the reading of stories, the metafictional techniques also allow him to make brilliant side trips into every major stylistic mode of modern novel. Calvino's introverted labyrinthine meditations may get confusing, even frustrating at times, but they are brilliant and absorbing, nonetheless. Salman Rushdie's comments on the novel aptly sum up its dazzling character: "*If, on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is a book to praise without buts. This is Calvino rampant in the world of books, Calvino joyously playing with the possibilities of fiction, of storytelling...You, the reader is (or are) a sort of dogged Lemmy Caution-figure trying to find Your way through the literary labyrinths of Calvino's city of words, his Alphabetaville" (258-59).

Ultimately, it may be concluded that there is a certain sameness between fiction and reality, that book is metaphor for universe and reading is a metaphor for living, so that "the world presented in the novel becomes a system of signs to be deciphered, and the reading of the literary text becomes a model for an interpretation of the world" (Luciana Picchione 5). What is asserted is an indeterminate reading strategy with multiple meanings and probabilities instead of enforcing a complete interpretation and a writing that presents only partial images rather one complete Book which in turn enforces man's position in the midst of multiplicity.

### **Works Cited:**

Barth, John. "Literature of Exhaustion". *Metafiction*, edited by Mark Currie. Longman, 1995. pp 161-72.

- 
- Beard, P.W. "Once Upon a Time in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*", *Italian Quarterly* XXX(1989)55-63. Rpt in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* vol 73: p 54.
- Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night, a Traveler*, trans. William Weaver. Harcourt, 1981.
- ..., "Cybernetics and Ghosts", *The Literature Machine*, translated by Patrick Creagh. Sicker and Warburg, 1989. p 9.
- Cotrupi, C. Nella. "Hypermatafiction: Italo Calvino's 'If on a Winter's Night a Traveller.'" *Style*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1991, pp. 280-90. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945908>. Accessed 24 May 2022.
- Picchione, Luciana Marchionne. Review of *If on a winter's night a traveler*. *International Fiction Review* 7, 1980, pp 75-76.
- Rushdie, Salman. "Italo Calvino". *Imaginary Homelands*. Granta Books, 1991.
- Scholes, Robert. *Fabulation and Metafiction*. University of Illinois Press, 1979, pp.2-4
- Schorer, Mark. "Techniques as Discovery", *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction 1920-195*. edited by John W. Aldridge, The Ronald Press Company, 1952
- Sorapure, Madeleine. "Being in the Midst: Italo Calvino's 'If On a Winter's Night a Traveler'". *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1985, pp. 702-10. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26282241>. Accessed 24 May 2022.