



Incredulity towards Emancipatory Metanarrative: A Postmodern critique of Barth’s Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction and Calvino’s Good for Nothing

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ABSTRACT

Metanarratives or grand narratives pertain to ideological constructs, having a tendency to universalize human experience in terms of both oppression and freedom. Postmodernism, in this regard, takes a skeptic stance towards such ideological foundations as human constructs and hence, fictive devices which intend to divide reality in terms of binaries as true/false, real/unreal and etc. It tends to dismantle the ideological foundation of reason and human emancipation not only in terms of complete freedom and salvation for humanity but also through a sense of surveillance of oppressive and hegemonic gaze which individuals experience in a Postmodern world. Postmodernism also unsettles the manipulative designs of narratives and voices multiplicity and heterogeneity in the form of diverse ways to approach knowledge in order to subvert the practice of exclusion within the dominant narrative of reason and enlightenment. This epistemological multiplicity and heterogeneity in turn, ultimately leads towards a sense of meaninglessness and chaos in human existence i.e. Angst. The skepticism towards the ideology of absolutistic freedom is achieved through Postmodernist notion of Simulated reality that is, hyperreality. Hyperreality in Postmodern literature tends to voice the real presence of absolute unreality in the form of ambivalence between the fixed notions of real versus unreal. Moreover, Postmodernism perturbs the safe haven of absolute real through various narrative techniques like metafiction, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction and blank parody. The present study deals with the Postmodernist analysis of Barth’s Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction and Calvino’s Good for Nothing particularly through Postmodernist narrative techniques. The study mainly deals with Barth and Calvino’s engagement with Postmodernist skepticism towards the metanarrative of emancipation as an illusory construct for human liberation. The study also intends to reveal that how the short stories of Barth and Calvino signify the lack and absence of unified reality and absolute freedom through narrative uncertainty and unreliability through self-conscious reflexivity.



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INTRODUCTION

John Barth’s *Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction* is one of the short stories in his collection of short fiction *Lost in the Funhouse* (1988). This collection of short stories is

mainly regarded as Postmodernist for having an inclination towards narrative unconventionality with no defined boundaries of external versus internal world along with drawing attention towards the task of fiction-making itself. In the same way, *Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction* is famous not only for its incongruous way of dealing with the convention of autobiography writing through maintaining a dialogic encounter between the author and the reader but rather it reflects the subservience of the author in relation to the reader as the reader is the one who gives shape to the identity of the authorial voice in the text. On the other hand, Italo Calvino's *Good for Nothing* is a short story in his collection *Numbers in the Dark* (1995), which comprises of narratives ranging from fables, stories and tales to imaginary dialogues with theme of existential absurdity and anxiety at its center. *Good for Nothing* has the same streak of meaningless anxiety and absurdity of an unnamed protagonist who is caught in the vicious circle of existence.

This research is focused upon two major points: First, I take as my major argument Barth and Calvino short stories as Postmodern narratives as a signifier of hyperreality along with a skeptical stance towards ideological construct of human emancipation and liberation; to further find out the role of oppressive and hegemonic *gaze* in terms of surveillance over individuals which ultimately leads towards anxiety that is, *Angst*—second my main concern is to connect my reading of Barth and Calvino—with its stress on Postmodernist narrative techniques in order to lay importance on dismantling the unified epistemology of reason and enlightenment as absolutistic reality.

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in Postmodern studies particularly through the analysis of Postmodern literature from the perspective of various Postmodernist narrative techniques. Therefore, significant works have been done on John Barth and Italo Calvino short fiction particularly from the viewpoint of Postmodern realism (Sexson, 1983), Postmodern self-reflexivity (Worthington, 2001), Postmodern metafiction (Egloff, 2014), and Postmodern neorealism (Orton, 2002). My study is unique as it tends to link the selected short fiction of Barth and Calvino with Postmodern incredulity towards the metanarrative of emancipation. Moreover, Postmodern study of metanarratives has not been yet explored in John Barth (1988) and Italo Calvino (1995) short fiction.

We first give a brief sketch of methodology used in my research followed by research questions and theoretical framework on which textual analysis with instances from the selected short stories is premised. Finally, I tend to maintain a stance that metanarrative of human liberation and freedom is an absence or a lack in a Postmodern context.

Research Questions

Thus the present research aims to answer the following broad question:

- 1) How Barth and Calvino short fiction establishes Postmodern skepticism towards the metanarrative of human emancipation and liberation?
- 2) In what ways, Barth and Calvino short stories voice the concept of *Angst* due to the surveillance of hegemonic and oppressive gaze?
- 3) In what manner, Barth and Calvino short stories exhibit a tendency towards hyperreality through Postmodernist narrative techniques?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) lend skepticism towards metanarratives through dismantling enlightenment as a social construct, which puts humanity in the lure of emancipation with pre-defined rules of human progress. They take enlightenment as a mythical construct but totalitarian in nature as it consists of a system, which is highly judgmental and rationalistic with pre-established norms. In this respect, they deny the possibility of authentic and absolute knowledge produced in the form of mass culture through denying the authorial supremacy and power, which is in a way, a Postmodern skepticism towards received authority and wisdom.

Baudrillard (1994) deconstructs metanarratives in terms of his radical stance towards *real* through the reference of Simulation, which signifies the absence of referent in Postmodern era. In this context, he appropriates the notion of hyperreal, which negates the possibility of essence and truth. Hyperreality, in Poststructuralist terms, creates ambivalence between the binaries of true versus false and real versus imaginary, which further unsettles the representation through signifier and signified. The concept of hyperreality and simulation through dismantling the absolute notion of real nullifies the possibility of totalitarian ideologies or metanarratives in Postmodern world. Baudrillard states the absence of metanarratives as:

“No more subject, no more focal point, no more center or periphery: pure flexion or circular inflexion (Baudrillard, 1994, p.31)”.

Foucault (1980) extends his skepticism towards metanarratives through his concept of fluidity and invisibility of oppressive gaze. According to him, gaze cannot be exercised through a singular site or individual having an overarching power as it has no absolute point. For Foucault, gaze involves “interiorization” which has the power to generate a system of surveillance with “no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze.” (ibid, p.155) He further demonstrates the concept of interiorization when an individual becomes his own “overseer” as a result of an overarching “inspecting gaze”. In this respect, he talks about the “diabolical aspect” of gaze, which makes society a machine with no specific owner to judge individuals according to its norms and beliefs. The presence of oppressive gaze and the loss of fundamentalist ideologies in the form of metanarratives lead towards the study of human existence as meaningless with no absolute site of human anxiety and which Heidegger calls *Angst* (Polt, 1999). In this context, Heidegger uses the term *Dasein*, which captures not only the crisis in meaningful existence within the present but also entails the same crisis within the past and the future as well. Hence, humanity cannot only be defined in terms of present only but it also contains the traces of past and future and thus, nullifies the metanarrative of purity within human existence.

Postmodernism employs various narrative techniques to extend its skepticism towards metanarratives. One of the significant narrative techniques is self-reflexive metafiction, which freely manipulates the idea that fiction is not a representation of the world but also of ambivalence regarding real versus unreal within the fiction itself. The fiction draws attention of the reader towards the fictionality of the work and hence, creates a dialogic encounter between the text and the reader. Historiographic metafiction, on the other hand, treats both history and fiction as “human constructs” which deconstructs the ontological representations of history (Hutcheon, 1988). Gudmundsdóttir (2003) discusses historiographic metafiction in relation to autobiography writing as both tend to rethink the representations of past. In this

context, he significantly draws a parallel between Postmodernism and autobiography writing as both believe in fluidity, narrative self-consciousness and uncertainty, lack of unified representations with no received authority. Moreover, according to him, both celebrate “Doubts about the power of memory”, “breakdown of chronology”, “sense of inconclusiveness”, “conscious forgetting” and “fictional re-presentation” (ibid, p.269-270). Another significant technique is Postmodern Intertextuality, which according to Hutcheon (1988) tends to bridge the gap between past and the present in order to “rewrite the past in a new context” (ibid, p.118). According to her, it is a way to dismantle the previous authority of “author-text relationship” and the originality of the text in order to voice the relationship of reader and text itself. Through this, intertextuality subverts the unification of meanings within texts and ironically, “...both provides and undermines context” (ibid, p.127). Parody, according to Hutcheon, is also a significant way to unsettle the concept of unified origin or originality being an “ex-centric” mode to extend skeptic stance towards metanarratives in order to give voice to those “...marginalized by a dominant ideology” (ibid, p.35). Parody and irony being “double voiced” in terms of its “enunciative situation” subverts the norms of realism in Postmodernist context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research is non-empirical as the researcher intends to apply Postmodern theory on short fiction of John Barth (1988) and Italo Calvino (1995). The research employs interpretative paradigm with its focus on socio-historic context of the given text. Moreover, the technique used for contextual analysis is cloze reading of the selected text as the paper intends to address what the text signifies with logical inferences, citing significant references from the text in order to support conclusion and findings drawn from the text (Lapp et al., 2015). Hence, the paper tries to juxtapose Postmodern theory with the text to problematize the notion of emancipatory metanarrative in a Postmodern context. The two selected short stories *Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction* from Barth’s collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1988) and *Good for Nothing* from *Numbers in the Dark* (1995) are selected for their Postmodern stance towards metanarratives along with their narrative uncertainty and unreliability in order to depict reality as hyperreal.

Theoretical Framework

Lyotard (1984) defines Postmodern condition as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’, that is, loss of faith in universalizing and totalizing ideologies which claim to define collective social experience. This suggests not only the crisis within the unification in epistemological constructions given by modernist Western societies but also, the failure of intelligentsia with respect to providing solutions for humanity. He significantly dismantles the norms of legitimization regarding knowledge and progress by defining narratives as “fables, myths and legends”. Lyotard, in this respect, identifies two main kinds of metanarratives: the speculative grand narrative and the metanarrative of emancipation. The skepticism towards speculative metanarrative suggests the nullification of the ‘absolute’ status of knowledge. According to him, knowledge is dual and multiple and hence, ambivalent in nature. Lyotard takes the metanarrative of emancipation with respect to knowledge as a means of liberation and human progress. In this respect, he describes narrative as sites of ideological constructions, which involve History, a narrative of historical legitimization; Psychology, a narrative of the Self; Sociology, a narrative of social formations and their effects on individuals (Malpas, 2003).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction, one of the short stories in John Barth's collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1988) is an interior monologue with flashbacks from the past where the narrator recalls and contemplates on life with his parents and on the life in general. Barth through this autobiographical narration lends his skepticism towards metanarrative of emancipation through the depiction of narrator as bound within the shackles of his own past. Throughout the narration, the authorial voice refers to his ambiguous and disoriented past when he states that he was the child not desired by his own parents. The mother due to her depression on his father's mental illness cannot even name her child. More significantly, the narrator throughout his writing is shown to be not in control of his own existence. From the very beginning and throughout his life, the narrator knows no freedom from troubles and difficulties as he states:

“The odds against my conception were splendid;
against my birth excellent; against my continuance
splendid (Barth, 1988, p.101)”.

The way narrator begins to describe his existence signify the loss of complete faith in the freedom of human existence. He starts with his skepticism towards language as an ideological system to depict reality with his failure to have command over the usage of language in the very beginning of his life as the authorial voice dreams that “I wish I'd begun differently” (Barth, 1988, p.99). Moreover, the narrator shows powerlessness over his own conditions of life in the form of not having “a proper name”. The name, according to him, which he owns is “misleading” as he “didn't choose it either” (ibid). The narrator not only states the helplessness of his own existence but also comments on general human existence as bound with no freedom. This lack of freedom becomes more explicit in the end of the story when he prays for his annihilation of existence as “*Put an end to this, for pity's sake! Now! Now!*” (ibid, p.108). He laments on the absence of freedom, which exists right from the beginning of creation with the continuance of human race as a “vengeance” when he states:

“I don't recall asking to be conceived! Neither
did my parents come to think of it. Even so.
Score to be settled. Children are vengeance
(Barth, 1988, p.99-100)”.

Barth (1988) through the convention of autobiography writing dismantles the notion of enlightenment and unified reason. In this respect, Barth significantly uses Postmodernist narrative technique of self-reflexive metafiction, which creates a dialogic encounter between the reader and the author in order to put emphasis on the presence of ambivalence within the binaristic representation of true versus false. It also tends to nullify the conventional authority of the author to represent reality within the fiction but rather, the narration involves the reader in order to give a certain identity to the text through drawing attention towards the fictionality of the autobiographical fiction. The narrator also leaves blanks and spaces which implicitly suggests that the presented text cannot be regarded as authentic or real in terms of its being as a conventional organic whole. The narrator starts the narration through giving the text a quality of a voice given by the reader and hence, deconstructing the authority of the authorial voice as “You who listen give me life in a manner of speaking” (ibid, p.99). Moreover, Barth through Postmodernist narrative technique of historiographical metafiction not only unsettles the authority of historical knowledge but also deconstructs enlightenment and human reason as a mythical construct, which makes a way forward to human disillusionment

and disappointment regarding human progress and emancipation throughout history. In this context, the narrator uses Postmodernist technique of Intertextuality in order to unsettle the heroic narratives of the past. Through this technique, the narrator significantly manipulates the historical figure of *Oedipus*, the king of Thebes inevitably destined to face his tragic fate, which also signifies the loss of faith in human enlightenment and progress. The narrator states:

“Not every kid thrown to the wolves ends
a hero: for each survivor, a mountain of
beast-baits; for every Oedipus, a city of
feebies (Barth, 1988, p.105)”.

The narrator does not follow the conventions of autobiographical writing as a pure depiction of experiential realities as the whole narration with empty blanks and spaces create a doubt in the mind of the readers regarding the historical facts about the narrator presented in the story. Through this, Barth not only establishes his skeptic stance towards the ideology of enlightenment and unified reason but also employs Postmodernist mode of autobiographical writing having uncertainty regarding the absolutistic memory and conclusiveness with self-reflexive “conscious forgetting” (Gudmundsdóttir, 2003). The narrator states in *Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction*:

“I’m not aware of myself at all, as far as I know.
I don’t think... I know what I’m talking about.
(Barth, 1988, p.106)”.

Barth (1988) captures the world with simulated reality through Postmodernist approach towards autobiography writing with no absolute referent. In this context, Barth through the story establishes a space replete with hyperreality, which nullifies the possibility of dividing reality in terms of binaristic representations and hence, the presence of metanarratives in Postmodernist context. The narrator, in this regard, makes an ironic confession when he dreams of being “beautiful, powerful, loving, loved” (ibid, p.106) but ultimately caught in the maze of hyperreal world that is, “absence of presence” (ibid) where existence cannot be defined through a proper referent. The narrator significantly hints upon the idea that having belief or faith in totalitarian ideologies finally leads humanity towards utter despair and disappointment in Postmodernist context. The narrator states:

“Being an ideal’s warped image, my fancy’s own
twist figure, is what undoes me.
(Barth, 1988, p.107)”.

Barth (1988) through the narrator in *Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction* depicts the crisis of human existence under a continuous hegemony of oppressive gaze. The narrator significantly relates that how his childhood and his whole life suffers as a result of hegemonic surveillance of his own father. The narrator helplessly states that his father continuously tried to negate his existence “...persistently, with at least half a heart” (ibid, p.103). In this context, he also mocks his existence in relation to his father as “Here I am, Dad: Your creature! Your caricature!” despite of his father’s desire to annul the identity of the narrator throughout the text, which is a Postmodernist Parody in order to give the enunciative power to the marginalized self of the narrator. Moreover, the surveillance of his father leads him towards the interiorization of oppressive gaze and the narrator in the story becomes his own spectator and the society a machine to judge him according to its own pre-established values and

beliefs. The narrator significantly states the various modes of societal oppression with an implicit reference towards an overarching oppressive gaze in the form of an “eye” which has the power to make individuals blind or rather blindfolded respectively. He states:

“Prohibition, Depression, Radicalism, Decadence,
and what have you. An eye sir for an eye.
(Barth, 1988, p.101-102)”.

The presence of various modes of oppressive gaze and the absence of faith in ideology of freedom puts the narrator in meaningless anxiety with no specified site, which Heidegger calls *Angst* (Polt, 1999). This feeling of pointless anxiety makes the narrator not only skeptic of the usefulness of his present and past existence but also makes him disillusioned regarding his future pursuits which is a Postmodernist stance towards the nullification of the idea of human progress. The narrator states:

“Womb, coffin, can—in any case, from my viewless
viewpoint I see no point in going further.
(Barth, 1988, p.107)”.

Calvino (1995) short story *Good for Nothing* depicts Postmodern incredulity towards emancipatory metanarrative in the form of an oppressive and hegemonic gaze, through a nameless protagonist who continuously finds himself under the surveillance of an unknown man who throughout the story reminds the protagonist “Your shoelace is undone” (ibid, p.27) repeatedly. Calvino through the protagonist of the story tries to dismantle the epistemology of freedom and the possibility of human progress and enlightenment as the protagonist in the story is enslaved in the shackles of gaze due to the hegemonic presence of a man, unknown to the main character of the story. The unknown man in the story represents gaze, which signifies surveillance over the protagonist. The significant detail regarding the description of the unknown man is that “... he held a book, closed, but with a finger inside, as if to keep his place” (ibid, p.26) as the book signifies epistemology or knowledge and the unknown man as an overarching gaze which represents society or its foundationalist norms, is the beholder or the keeper of the knowledge which represents the inescapable hegemony of the society. The gaze of an unknown man operates at mainly two levels that is, external and internal. It is external because the gaze in the story determines the existence of the protagonist in terms of the surveillance of society regarding societal norms, beliefs and values and also internal as it includes internalization of the values and beliefs given by an “inspecting gaze” of society as a machine to judge individuals according to pre-established norms and beliefs. The formidable influence of gaze over the protagonist and the repetitive demand of the unknown man to tie his unlaced shoes puts him in a continuous anxiety which Heidegger calls *Angst* (Polt, 1999) and the only desire of the protagonist becomes to escape the “inexorable gaze” of the unknown man. The protagonist describes the overwhelming gaze of an unknown man as:

“Immediately, I had the impression that his eyes
were upon me, motionless eyes that took me in
from head to toe, that didn’t spare my back
either, nor my insides (Calvino, 1995, p.26)”.

Calvino (1995) maintains the notion of hyperreal through describing the indefinite position of an unknown man. The protagonist in the beginning of the story cannot describe whether the unknown man is “standing or walking” (ibid, p.26) with doubt in his mind regarding the age of the man and also that whether the protagonist is walking towards the unknown man or vice

versa, which is not only a Postmodernist skepticism towards the ability of memory to recall the past but also the loss of unified referent in Postmodernist context. The hyperreality is also created in a way when the unnamed protagonist describes the presence of an old man without a specific site as the gaze follows the protagonist everywhere. The description of an unknown man with “an almost lipless mouth” along with emphasis on his being as a form of surveillance over protagonist tends to pinpoint the unknown man as an almost human, a hyperreal entity. The protagonist states:

“each time I would find him nearer, and looking at me. In the end he was standing in front of me, an almost lipless mouth on the point of creasing into a smile (Calvino, 1995, p.26)”.

Calvino (1995) through the image of unlaced shoes manipulates Postmodern intertextuality in order to re-present or rather to re-write the history of absurdity of human existence in a new context but again with no definite meanings. The Parody of human existence lies in the presence of the protagonist in the “same few streets” with “same faces” alongwith the repeated admonition of the unknown man regarding unlaced shoes “It’s undone again” (ibid, p.27) with protagonist’s anxiety as “wild terror” under the oppressive gaze (ibid, p.28) accompanied by “...the shame of being seen bending down yet again to tie” (ibid) as the gaze gradually shifts from the unknown man to “...the gaze of the crowd” with protagonist’s sole desire to “recover my reputation” (ibid, p.27) which signifies the hegemony of gaze inflicted by societal norms. In this context, the image also brings out Postmodernist notion of historiographic metafiction regarding the historical representations of futility of humankind. The image of unlaced shoes brings the reader back to *Oedipus*, the king trying to answer the riddle of the Sphinx, the riddle which, revolves around the question of existence with a dominant image of feet which signifies humanity as destined to be under oppression of the absurdity of human existence. The image of unlaced shoes also brings the mind of the readers to Estragon’s swollen feet struggling to pull off his boots bound in oppression of nothingness and existentialist crisis “...living out a role in a play of forces from which there is no escape” (Armstrong, 1990, p.93). From tragedy of *Oedipus*, the Theban King in *Oedipus Rex* (1982) to Estragon in tragicomedy by Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (2011), both signify the skepticism rather the lack of freedom of human existence. The unknown man laments on the futility of the pursuit of humans towards progress through the inability of protagonist to tie the laces of his shoes properly as “...one pained by some natural fact beyond human control” (Calvino, 1995, p.28). Another intertextual reference which, contributes to the study of human existence as absurd with no freedom is that of a search “in vain” by an unknown man of a “second Noah” which echoes the futility and brutality of Yeats’ *Second Coming* with “A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” (Yeats, 1984, p.247) and also which, ultimately ends in the annihilation of human existence. The unknown man in this context pitilessly states:

“It means if the Flood comes we’ll all die together.
(Calvino, 1995, p.30)”.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Barth and Calvino perturb the notion of human emancipation in terms of depiction of human existence as bound in the shackles of oppressive and hegemonic surveillance, which leads individuals towards a continuous state of anxiety or *Angst*. In this context, both writers depict hyperreality in order to dismantle the unification within the

totalitarian ideology of enlightenment and human reason. Specifically, Barth through *Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction* significantly employs the narrative style of autobiography in order to lend Postmodernist skepticism towards the purist representation of past. Moreover, the two authors employ Postmodernist narrative techniques particularly Historiographic metafiction, Intertextuality and Parody in order to mock human existence with faith in absolutistic ideologies like human liberation and progress throughout history.

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