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Posting the Hysterics: Re/Telling Reality in Postmodern Fiction

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Abstract

The paper proposes to examine the oft-discussed literary genre 'Hysterical Realism' and its possibilities in postmodern fiction. The word 'contemporary fiction' can be used here against postmodern fiction but I deliberately use the phrase as it delineates the certain features and characteristics necessary to proliferate this embryonic genre. We can put some important elements of postmodern fiction as playfulness, black humour, intertextuality, flagrant shift in narrative voice, legitimating of cultural and historical references, maximalist prose or disorganized sprawling and emotionally disconnectedness; Thomas Pynchon is one of the n best exemplar because he deploys pop culture, war fiction, detective fiction, science fiction and mathematics in his writing. The other example can be Umberto Eco who in his fiction tries to negotiate future by combining more traditional past and present discourses blending medieval history, metafiction and theology. More or less postmodern shift stands against the traditional and normative discourses that is why it is claimed that *Tristram*

Shandy and *Finnegans Wake* do not fit in the concept of novel as a self-contained or closed system, a perfect little world from beginning to end. Each belongs to certain genre of writing but to the endless proliferation of meanings.

Keywords

Hysterical Realism; Magical Realism; Dirty Realism; Neorealism; Hyper-realism; Hysteria and Realism; Zadie Smith; David Foster Wallace; Don DeLillo; Thomas Pynchon.

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Introduction

The term 'realism' has a long history but the formal trend beginning with mid 19th century Anglo- Francophone writers, depicting contemporary life and society as it was, or is, authors opted for depiction of everyday life and banal activities and experiences, instead of a romanticized or similarly stylized repetition. But now the Post-realist aesthetics situated within a Baudrillarean realm of 'Simulacra' has come to dominate much of contemporary fiction. The reality is so much than the real one. The code doesn't present prior social reality. It creates a new social reality, created or simulated from models or defined by reference to models- generated from ideas. This cybernetic game ultimately results in loss of reality: the first phase displays basic reality; the second one in excessive form; the third destructs or contorts the reality; the fourth permeates with ideological effect and fifth a new reality emerges. The excessive consciousness of the 'real' as mere artifice leads many serious authors to engage in an ongoing mockery of mimesis. The disappearance of the real itself becomes a cliché of contemporaneity. There is no infinite creation but endless reproduction; there is jaded experience of life and pose rather than reality.

Other Realisms in Literature

Magical Realism

There are two conflicting perspective, one based on so-called rational view of reality and the other on the other acceptance of the supernatural as a prosaic reality. Normal and modern world is represented with authentic description of

human and society. It aims to seize the paradox union of opposites; challenge binary opposition; it involves the fusion of the real and fantastic. It is “an amalgamation of realism and fantasy”; way of representing and responding to reality pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. The incorporate technique are hybridity, authorial reticence or lack of clear opinion about accuracy of events and the credibility of the world; supernatural and natural elements.

Dirty Realism

In 1983 Granta issue (entitled “Dirty Realism: New Writing in America”), Bill Buford argued “new” type of realism had emerged in response to the pretensions of postmodernism. To him “It is not heroic and grand: the epic ambitions of Norman Mailer or Saul Bellow seem, in contrast, inflated, strange even false. It is not self-consciously experimental like so much of the writing variously described as ‘postmodern’ ‘post contemporary’ or ‘deconstructionist’ that was published in the sixties and seventies. The work of Barth, William Gaddis or Thomas Pynchon seems pretentious in comparison” (79).

Neorealism

It is a new brand of realism that rejects postmodern strategies as overly and unjustly privileged by academia. Tom Wolfe himself regarded the initiation of this realism in his book *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, as a form of narrative holding neorealism. In 1989 in “Literary Manifesto for a New Social Novel” says rejecting the claim of postmodernism as decadent or elitist, Wolfe argued that realistic novel realistic in journalistic tradition of a writer like Zola- has the ability to be socially pertinent and captivating: “It is not merely that reporting is useful in gathering the petty facts that create verisimilitude and make a novel gripping or absorbing, although that side of the enterprise is worth paying attention to. My contention is that, especially in an age like this, they are essential for the greatest effects literature can achieve” (110).

Hyper-realism

This kind of realism shows the inability of the consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality in technology. There are also some other

variants of realism derived from philosophy, theology, social science, and referent from World War such as, Critical Realism-Roy Bhasker and Rom Haret; Deep Realism- John Somer and John Daly; Postmodern Realism; Spectacle Realism-in 1999 by Joseph Dewey; Fiduciary Realism-Ihab Hassan. In the book *The Mourning After* it is concluded that the break of postmodernism had already occurred. The writers such as Hassan, Barth, Raymond Federman, William Gass, and Malcolm Bradbury they confirmed the shift to aesthetics and theoretical focus and a new kind of realism emerged in the era. The process has taken place to break with postmodernism with its apparent solipsism and irresponsibility, its ethical and social variety; postmodernism failed and demised (via a certain return to ethics, religion, and realism) was inevitable.

Hysterical Realism as a Literary Genre

Hysterical realism or *recherché* postmodernism, James Wood coined the term in 2000 while criticizing the novel *White Teeth* of Zadie Smith in *The New Republic*. The notion of hysterical realism according to him is the contemporary conception of “big, ambitious novel’ that pursues “vitality at all costs” and subsequently “knows a thousand things but does not know a single human being”(1). It is typified by a strong contrast between elaborately absurd prose, plotting, or characterization and careful, detailed investigations of real specific social phenomena. In hysterical realism the plot is developed under the conventions of realism which is exhausted and overworked. Excess of storytelling and a foregrounding of plot to a failure to provide psychologically rounded characters .In James Wood’s words “Information has become a new character” (2). Wood explains that Charles Dickens is the parent figure of this genre and the new legacy circumscribing works by authors are such as Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith. Defining this term Daniel Zalewsky says:

James Wood, the very smart and very grouchy literary critic for *The New Republic*, has become increasingly exasperated with those enormous, encyclopedic novels like "The Corrections" that

contemporary writers keep churning out. These show-offy books -- all longer than "Ulysses" and teeming with zany-yet-brilliant characters whose improbably interlocked stories are punctuated by smarty-pants digressions on arcane topics like earthquake detection, Quebecois exceptionalism and the semiotics of hot-dog stands - are, Wood says, "perpetual motion machines" that are "ashamed of silence" and pursue "vitality at all costs." He has even coined a damning phrase for the genre: "hysterical realism." (2)

The Features of Hysterical Realism

Corny and Bland characters

The term has been defined by many critics in rhizomatic features as a genre revolving around 'hyper-inter- connected' novels in synecdochic character. James Wood himself defines caricaturist portrayal of the character in the essay.

If, say, a character is introduced in London, call him Toby Awknotuby (that is, "To be or not to be"--ha!) then we will be swiftly told that he has a twin in Delhi (called Boyt, which is an anagram of Toby, of course), who, like Toby, has the same very curious genital deformation, and that their mother belongs to a religious cult based, oddly enough, in the Orkney Islands, and that their father (who was born at the exact second that the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima) has been a Hell's Angel for the last thirteen years (but a very curious Hell's Angels group it is, devoted only to the fanatical study of late Wordsworth), and that Toby's mad left-wing aunt was curiously struck dumb when Mrs. Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979 and has not spoken a word since. And all this, over many pages, before poor Toby Awknotuby has done a thing, or thought a thought! (3)

Such piece of writing as Wood claims drawn from Dickens; this kind of writing hard to develop characters and unnecessarily emptied out from emotional and moral tones. It cannot produce any type of tragedy and anguish; the reader is

kept emotionally away from the characters confrontation of fissures. This contrived and desultory writing keeps readers emotionally intact.

Hyper-Inter-Connectedness and Forster's Dictum 'Only Connect'

The unintended intertextuality flourishes novels of these aforesaid writers. According to Wood, there is a perpetual motion machine which is afraid of silence and wants to abolish the stillness comes up with plots and sub-plots in each chapter. Storytelling has become a kind of grammar and it has been pursued at all costs, it seems that vitality is the primary resource to make a big and ambitious novel. Lev Grossman in his essay argues that this realistic genre is a finite part of the infinite world:

What I see now when I look at books like *White Teeth* and *Infinite Jest* and *Underworld* is—among many other things—an attempt to gesture at the infinite, overabundant, overwhelming complexity of reality, and the increasing force with which that complexity is borne in upon us by means electronic and otherwise (i.e. by the overabundance of blogs like this one)... “. You can imagine those books as endlessly ramifying trees of story, their branches dividing and dividing until the reader gets the point, which is that they could branch and divide forever and still not capture the full complexity of the world around them. (4)

He again adds that in these books the disparate characters are more or less slowly connected to each other and there is endless branching narrative tree which sprouts with so many stories and sub-stories entwined with each other. The characters are having only two or three defining traits and ultimately remain flat characters. Such type of characteristics is shown in Dickens' cartoonish characters.

Hysteria and Realism

These novels also share at the level of characterization a kind of cognitive disorder of postmodern experience and social and psychological disorders of postmodern or post welfare state – capitalism. Hysteria according to Freud is

caused by repression of desires but Jung explicates it as rooted in dissociation and splitting from reality. The characters of the novel always try to look into future and for them present is unbearable; there is no unity of scenes and to characters consciousness they jump in time. Rebecca Schneider in her book, *The Explicit Body in Performance* explains the parity between hysteria and reality in feminist perspective giving argument of Élan Diamond:

Writing towards a 'feminist mimesis', Élan Diamond has examined the complicity between realism and hysteria, suggesting that the realists always hysterical in that it is always symptomatic of its construction (1990-91, 59-92). To bring hysteria in realism into focus for purposes of feminist explication, Diamond advocates an explicitness of hysterical realism – a performer's practices which shows the ground of realism, unveiling its basis in hysteria. With an emphasis on an explicitness hysterical realism versus implicitness realistic hysteria, a performer's body would, like a hysteric. (5)

For Wood realism largely rests around the portrayal of the character but the novelists keep secondary to portraying characters because they have to capture the big canvas and they deviate themselves to 'brash, forced, and spurious realism'. There is also a certain kind of trait having these novels' characters as they are awkward in a sense that they are represented in inhuman stories. The stories are narrated from the lived experience of human beings but these recent stories are sheltered in inhuman subjects. The characters also lack depth; their inherent virtue lies in exhibiting surface effects. Offering explanation to this point Jeff Staiger says

... since a whole school of fiction is being accused, on the part of the culture itself: the postmodern irony these works revel in stems from a fear of the sincerity and empathy required for getting close to the ultimate reality of people, and a corresponding delight in surface effects, technical sophistication, and profuseness as substitutes for depth. The result is a kind of fiction in flight from itself, hastening

from one extravagant incident to the next without taking time to flesh out the human beings to whom and in whom the events could have meaning. Because the reader has no basis for forming expectations about them, when the characters in such fiction act, they come across as quirky and arbitrary. They exhibit behavior, not agency. (7)

Novelists Charged as Hysterical Realist

James Wood criticizing Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* accused her of a hysterical writer and along with other novelists are selected by him as lineage of this genre like David Forster Wallace, Don Delillo, Thomas Pynchon and many others. Their writing are charged with the hysterical prose or 'to describe the sort of wacky, antic, profuse mode of narrative that had come to seem the cutting edge of the novel'(2).

Zadie Smith

Smith is the first writer attacked by Wood in his review of *White Teeth*. She herself admitted that "hysterical realism" was "a painful accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own *White Teeth* and a few others"(1). The whole essay is written upon her style of writing Wood explains that the characters of recent novels are not genuine human beings but they are connected into the connectedness that never know. Smith's novel itself a manic prose stories, plots, and subplots shrouding and she could not control. But one shortcoming of Wood's criticism is to detest postmodern fiction and he cannot see the leading trend of these novelists they want to show their characters and plots as they may in actual shape without distortion of postmodern style. The ambition and emotion Wood wants to search in recent novels but they are full of disjunctive, antiform -anarchy. There comes the difference of modernist and postmodernist style. In the words of Hassan, postmodernism occurs when there are irony, indeterminacy, antithesis, performance, participation, happening, exhaustion introduced in the text.

According to Brian McHale postmodernist fiction is not epistemologically concerned but it is ontologically concerned. Where epistemology is the study of knowledge and understanding, ontology is the study of being and existence. The novel of Smith is caught between these dichotomies. The other novelists attribute what McHale appropbrates in his argument. According to McHale,

Ontological character of the postmodern novel is shown in its concern with the making of autonomous worlds. So, instead of asking questions about how a world may be known, postmodern fiction asks questions like ‘what is a world?; What kinds of world are there ; how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? (11)

Steven Conner simplifies McHale’s claim of recognizing the position that epistemological and ontological concerns are by no means mutually exclusive, for to ask about how a world is constituted and how it differs more other possible worlds is always to ask implicitly about the conditions of that world’s comprehensibility we are involved here, not in an absolute transformation but in rather a shift of emphasis or literary philosophical ‘dominant’. The ontological dominant means that recuperation of distortion, deviation and other non-realistic effects as the effects of distorted or intensified consciousness is no longer possible. Instead the worlds summoned up by literary texts are grounded simply in their own textual mechanisms; subjectivity gives way to textuality .McHale further adds that postmodernist fiction is a kind of carnivalesque interweaving of styles, voices, and registers which unconsciously a kind of history, a regularly developing organism or genealogy.

David Foster Wallace

Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* is one of the examples of hysterical realistic writing as Wood glosses the features of this trend which aptly suits with the novel, “a zany overexcitement, a fear of silence and of stillness, a tendency toward self-conscious riffs, easy ironies, puerility....” The novel is a most intriguing, in-

depth, comedic, sorrowful, and apprehensive and overall sagaciously maximalist read in the postmodern canon. The parallelism between the Enfield Tennis and Academy and the Ennet Drug and Alcohol Recovery House using alternating esoteric and colloquial words create the most epic and exhausting novel of modern times. In a book *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, it is approved that Wallace's prose is maximalist in his fiction he used. He utilizes the rhetorical devices such as parody and pastiche and more importantly his narrative unquestionably linear, realistic, and earnest. He himself proclaimed of his writing style as, 'using postmodern techniques, postmodern aesthetics but using that to have to do with spirituality and emotion and continuity and ideas that the avant-garde would consider very old-fashioned so there's a kind of melting, it's using postmodern techniques for very traditional ends, if there's a group... that's the group I want to belong to.'

The novel belongs to hysterical realist group because Wallace uses seriousness with parody the effect comes out as cartoonish the real does not seem real, the depiction of human beings are part of a zany world. In the modern world the novel attempts to show how the world wants to be dehumanized. The portrayal of characters Hal and Gately, one remains author's voice and the other ex-addict trying to reform himself are mere reductive to their world. On magnitude the stories and actions are ostentatious. Staiger defining the novel writes:

It is Wallace's burgeoning, febrile novel, with its red herring premise, multiple plots, corny action, allegorical names, parodies galore, and cast of dozens if not hundreds. In addition to the fatal entertainment cartridge and the wheelchair assassins, Wood might have mentioned a building elaborately constructed in the shape of a human brain, a contaminated zone between Boston and Canada in which a gigantic wailing infant crashes about like Godzilla, those Quebecois terrorists who place giant mirrors across highways to make motorists veer off the road to avoid apparent head-on collisions, a

boy who extorts victories on the tennis court by playing with a gun to his head, a mysterious cellar-dwelling guru who licks sweat off of students' bodies in exchange for advice, an entire family snuffed out by cyanide when each attempts mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the previous victim, a deformed girl born without a spine whose father hides her face under masks of various starlets while "diddling" her nightly (the hysterical readily grades into the grotesque). (12)

Don DeLillo

DeLillo's novel *Underworld* is said to be hysterical realistic work as in developing characters and plots under fine prose hundreds and hundreds pages are written without stopping by the author. There seems a never ending story and silence never comes across in their way. The different stories are intertwined by the writer. Characters are connected in a way as every other thing is connected to another one. This connection is after all a paranoid one; in the words of Wood "these novels tell us that we are all –by the Bomb (DeLillo)". But Staiger does not agree to Wood's concerning paranoid connection. He agrees to the point that characters are connected forcibly. But actually the novel wants to create the dire consequences of technology's ascendancy in the postwar period, so the characters atomized existences seem to be fitting in the novel. The nun's paranoid consciousness that she is the incarnation of J. Edgar Hoover is not so much far-fetched but it is a kind of mockery; the overall effect of the novel is serious in nature and the portrayal of characters are convincing and credulous. The characters are lazy and their consciousness, memory, and perception all form a totality to their personality. The action itself consists a deep thinking and ponderousness over the work. The characters exhibit a kind of flatness under calm and dependable nature and this flatness is not opaque but this unreal state of them is realistically portrayed.

Thomas Pynchon

Thomas Pynchon's fiction is literary the paradigmatic case of postmodernism, McHale says that Pynchon's novels exemplify various theories of post modernity, the cultural and historical condition of the postmodern period—including those of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Haraway others. They also illustrate various theories of postmodernism—the period's characteristics, aesthetic forms and practices- including those that characterize postmodernism in terms of double-coding, suspenseive irony and pastiche, the ontological dominant, and cognitive mapping. Pynchon deploys the rhetorical devices of a pastiche of paranoia; he uses the contemporary socio-cultural thematic concern as pop culture, sex and politics narration with subtle metaphorical discipline etc.

The novel of Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a good example of treating serious issues with inappropriate humour or rather the quality of being facetious. The act of representing the world in the novel is displayed through a sensibility in the first passage of the novel and the story quickens in action and realism. The plot is of a realistic one and appropriating with situation, character, and perspective, stylish and exotic words. Approving this quality Staiger speculates that a writer cannot write and think of starting a novel with such description until he had written thousands of novels (16).

The novel is written in bombastic and playful language and this style is common among these writers to create an effect of satirical fiction. These overtly and inexhaustible written prose are a ploy used to achieve the plan of representing the popular culture. The meaning of such novels is never found in depth due to lack of seriousness.

Conclusion

The genre like this is inevitable according to the zeitgeist of the contemporary times. The world now has moved out from paranoid and obsessive mood and it has become schizophrenic in nature. Jameson in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" ponders, "Our contemporary social system has lost its

capacity to know its own past has begun to live in a 'perpetual present' without depth, definition, or secure identity (125)." Literature reflects what is prevalent in society it cannot present solutions but to present what are the values and devalues, dehumanized condition of a society and degradation of culture. These novels are some reflections of the society to which way it is going, this kind of fiction which is overt and orchestrated to express the sudden change of mood. These fictions without any seriousness and subtlety are in a way to enhance the self-consciousness and accomplish the work of demand and supply in excessive way. They distort the art in order to create the effect of popular culture. The term aptly suits to this period of writing but one can argue that there may be the other realms of literature where such type of writing is found. It is up to the reader what they ascertain and assign the position of such piece of literature.

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