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Fragmentation and Parody in Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*

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Abstract

Fragmentation and parody are some of the elements of postmodern literature. The novel *Snow White* by Donald Barthelme projects the encounter of the fictional world with that of the real world. The author has transformed the fairy characters into human characters where the seven dwarfs get transformed into seven adults sharing their lives with Snow White. To speak plainly, Barthelme intended to reflect the recklessness of the society through his characters. The style of language is challenging through its fragmented structure slacking in coherence.

Keywords

Fragmentation; complexity; incoherence; parody; Donald Barthelme; *Snow White*.



Fragmentation and parody are some of the elements of postmodern literature. The novel *Snow White* by Donald Barthelme projects the encounter of the fictional world with that of the real world. The author has transformed the fairy characters into human characters where the seven dwarfs get transformed into seven adults sharing their lives with Snow White. David Harvey explains that it is “necessarily fragmented, a 'palimpsest' of past forms super-imposed upon each other, and a 'collage' of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral” (66).

Barthelme’s *Snow White* (1965) is a postmodern novel, which is in reality a reflection of the fairy tale “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”. The main purpose of Barthelme unlike his other novels is to parody or to present the contemporary world with its vices and follies. The total environment of the novel has nothing in common with the original Snow White story. The innocent air which was incensed by the readers, could no longer withstand the harsh reality of the filthy air of the contemporary world.

Barthelme has finely chopped his ideas and efforts throughout the novel in juxtaposing the contemporary Snow White with that of her counterpart in the fairy tale. The readers could no longer digest the depiction of the “postmodern era” Snow White, when she comes out with her sighs of dissatisfaction and complains the whole world for her erotic emotions. This pop culture is vehemently parodied through Barthelme’s characterization. Snow White’s dissatisfaction is expressed through the following lines:

Snow White took her head out of the window, and pulled her long black hair which had been dangling down. “No one has come to climb up. That says all. This time is the wrong time for me. I am in the wrong time. There is something wrong with all those people standing there, gaping and gawking. And with all those who did not come and at least try to climb up. To fill the role. And with the very world itself, for not being able to supply a Prince (131-132).

In the fairy tale, Snow White though lives with the seven dwarfs does not have depicted with such stained thoughts. She is represented as a young girl of fresh innocence, immaturity, inexperienced, fearful, undeceitful, etc. Stepping back to Barthelme's novel, the very name of the novel itself gives a contradictory image in which 'snow' and 'white' refers to innocence and purity respectively. As for Barthelme, the very title of the novel itself could be parodied to start with. He has also through his characterization and exposure of situations parodied the popular and consumerist culture with its complexities and polygamous lives.

The readers must also notice that the time of publication of the novel is very important in the sense that, the picture of the liberated woman - Snow White and the liberated spirit of the sixties has a background in itself from the then emerging movements. It is the time of the emergence of Feminism and the upcoming spirit of equality, freedom and power, which was an uproar and heart-cry of the women of the European nations.

Dealing with the structure, language and narration, the structure is fragmented, incoherent, lacking a proper beginning, middle and the end which are the established representatives of postmodernism. The traits of incompleteness, complexity, confusion, confrontation of contradictory ideas, encounter of thought and action, mixture of past and present and challenging the grammatical structures are well known as well. Horst Ruthrof describes the strategy as a "schema of 'openness'", in which "meaning is...something on the move, a dynamic which at times is deceptively slow but never comes to rest in social discourse" (30, 32).

The style of language has the usage of jargon, a particular way of speech and utterance. By the use of questionnaire in the concluding part, he shows his unique style and representation when compared to that of his other works and style. The readers are then and there helpless in the part of narration. It sometimes takes a first person singular and plural, omniscient narrator, interior monologues, dialogues loosely arranged like a collage. There is no coherence in

the narrative voice, discourse, plot or events and are rather fragmentary reflections on the protagonists' roles in the story.

According to Bakhtin, language is a dynamic entity which, far from being neutral, at one and the same time reflects and transforms the pattern of meaning instituted by society. He also introduces terms like polyphony and heteroglossia which represents the presence of more than one voice and more than one viewpoint which make up the social life respectively. In postmodern literature, the narrator's voice does not dominate over the speech of the characters in order to present a unified and privileged body of knowledge.

The polyphonic work presents a world where no individual discourse had prominence over other discourses, which are all but differential interpretations of the world. Postmodernism is noted for recognition of the fact that power, knowledge and subjectivity are in a state of constant flux. Hence, no knowledge – no reality- expounded in any text is to be taken as real or final. The coherent narrative voices are fragmented and broken up by the inclusion of other non-literary devices like a letter, questionnaire.

The contemporary Snow White lives with seven dwarfs sharing herself with them. Though the picturization has the reference of fairy tale characters like Snow White, Rapunzel and Little Red Riding Hood, the contemporary storyline is quite a parody of the contaminated society and even world. The representatives of the dwarfs are Kevin, Edward, Hubert, Clem, Bill and Dan. They drink beer, have modern jobs, and enjoy sex and culture and “tending the vats” (18) in which they prepare their father's recipes of Chinese baby food.

The readers could smell that Barthelme not only parodies the title and the snow white image of fiction and reality, but the situations that Snow White is indulged in as well. The picture of the fragmented novel brings to the readers' mind that Snow White not only dutifully meets all the demands of the dwarfs, she awaits a “Prince figure”, a rescuer of her from that deteriorating condition as well. She associates Paul with the “Prince- figure” but doubts her own thoughts

and imagination as the result of her mere boredom. She says, “Is there a Paul, or have I only projected him in the shape of my longing, boredom, ennui and pain?” (102).

Though Barthelme has presented the image of the contemporary Snow White liberated in her spirit, expectations in her brings to the forefront the image of a stereotype woman’s mentality. But Barthelme parodies the expectation that, some women may get a real perfect man- a real Prince-figure, but for Women like Snow White, has to imagine and wait. “Have I been trained in the finest grace and arts all my life for nothing but this” (108).

This again gives in a thought that women need liberation, freedom of work, thought, right on her body, vote- but still she has the stereotypical emotions embedded within herself. Despite all the liberation of women movements got its sunny day during the sixties and seventies, Barthelme questions if women still need some hero and Prince to come and rescue and redeem them. So the dwarfs call snow white’s poem on liberty as “a dirty great poem four pages long” (10), she sees herself or rather desires to be “free, free, free” (10).

She also says, she is “tired of being a horsewife” (43), which again shows that how her body is used not by her and her right over her body is denied that it is used as a pleasure machine and she is bound to work for all the seven men with all her might. She does not desire to live in the universe of the dwarfs-deformed men who have wrong perception on female, her body and her role in the society. She is angry at the “male domination of the physical world” (43). She also has a kind of aversion towards the language used by men in the male-dominated society- a spirit of the period.

But finally when the prince figure dies, there is no hope or individual strength for Snow White to take-up her life all alone and live for herself, instead she returns to the universe which she hated- male guarded imprisonment, which parodies the helpless conditions of the female who talks about liberation and

freedom must in some way embed her life, hope and strength within a male figure.

Thus the novel is presented as a piece of postmodern work with the elements of postmodernism embedded in it. Barthelme thus made the novel as a tool to parody the contemporary society with some techniques of fragmentation and overlapping narratives and discourses.

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