

Analyzing the Narrative Technique of Amitav Ghosh

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Narrative is the telling of stories, and stories are not the same as language even though they may use it. Stories/narratives are a form of discourse. The point of my thesis is to show the techniques employed by narrative and how these are chosen or dictated according to the ideology of the narrative discourse. For instance, realism is found to be an excellent technique for discourses that narrate the nation. In fact my survey shows how it was the literary technique of choice for generations of Indian writers in English starting from Bankimchandra, through the freedom movement, and even in the post-independence period when the young nation state was endeavoring to consolidate it.

Palmer has enumerated the features of the narrative which will help in turn to define it. First of all, although words in a verbal narrative can be analyzed down to their minimum units, as can any words, their meaning is dependent at least as much upon their positioning in the narrative as upon their place in grammar and the dictionary. Like all discourse, narratives are infinite in number. They are invented not used. Narratives contain undefined information in the sense that the meaning of bits of narrative cannot be established outside the narrative. They are actualized discourse and have limited potential existence in the form of a grammar. Narratives are monologic. Finally, they are entities whose structures do not depend entirely upon the signs out of which they are built up, and therefore it is legitimate to investigate them across a range of media. (Jerry Palmer, 1991)

In other words, through their implications they enter into the narrative structure of the story as a whole at the same time as they mean, through their signifier-signified relationship, whatever it is that they mean. In realism since a stable one to one relationship between signifier and signified is assumed the act of mimesis or diegesis is again assumed to be possible in totum. That means one can in verbal narrative employ realism, imitate, describe and pin into place reality out there with complete accuracy. This in turn would imply that meaning can be completely and precisely contained in a narrative and conveyed as such to the reader. In a realist story/novel it would also make closure possible, even an essential component, of the narrative.

However, no narrative is a pure depiction, imitation or recording. It is always mediated or filtered through at least one consciousness, generally that of the author. Being such, there is no direct access to reality out there, as realism would have us believe. This mediation, moreover, would leave the narrative open to the intervention of the author's ideology.

According to a structuralist analysis of a narrative, the meaning of the events narrated is given not by any resemblance that they may have to real world events, but by their function in a story. A realist text presumes that meaning is given by an accurate portrayal of or a resemblance to real events, or a reality out there. Again, according to a structuralist analysis, the nature of each individual story is derived from the way it employs the series of functions which lie beneath its surface and into which it is analysable. If the story were not representative of a large group such as the folk-tale, for instance, it would still have a 'skeleton' of nameable events. A realist text does not presuppose a 'hidden mechanism' beneath the surface that generates meaning as the story unfolds itself beneath the eyes of the reader. In a realist depiction the meaning is contained in the language and language acts as a transparent medium through which 'reality' may be observed. Again, according to the structuralist method, all events in all stories of a particular genre are reducible to some function or other and a list of all the functions is a representation of the common narrative structure of the genre.

In the structuralist analysis of narrative, characters, like events, will be seen to derive their meaning not from some resemblance to people in real life, but from the function that they perform in the story. Characters are basically no more than the list of attributes that are obtained from their semantic functions. In other words, they are no more than the sum of their actions and these actions can only be understood in terms of the values which structure them. In a realist approach a character is not merely a textual entity which is composed of a set of attributes attached to the action it performs, but also derives meaning from its resemblance to a 'real life' individual.

A traditional approach to a realist text presupposes that the latter has a meaning which appears to inhere naturally in it. Its' meaning, in other words, is a natural property of it. Having said that, let me examine the traditional approach to the production of meaning and the position of the speaking subject by which term is meant the person who uses language or a text. If narrative is a dialogue, then it is dialogue of a special kind, one where the interlocutors are not physically present to each other. The speaker is represented by words, and the listener cannot respond. The traditional definition, in fact, of a mass medium of communication is in fact, one source many receivers and a one-way information flow. This places the 'listener', whether s/he be a reader or a viewer, in a position which has its own special characteristics.

The codes of representation mark the reader's position as one where the representation acquires coherence. There is a double effect here: first, the reader is

assured that his/her place is a meaningful one because it is the place at which meaning is produced; second, the codes appear completely natural, no more than the fact of imitation. What is ignored or concealed is that 'codes' are in fact constructs and the product of a particular work achieved in a particular civilisation. This is precisely what realism when employed as a narrative technique attempts to achieve.

The perception of the imitative image here too achieves two fundamental things. It gives to the viewing subject the sense of coherent meaning, and in doing so, manages to produce the impression that what is in fact the highly artificial, coded 'imitation' of reality is no more than an accurate copy. Therefore, this 'imitation' is the natural bearer of meaning which is already stable and fixed in the world as it is imitated. Now it becomes clear why realism as a narrative technique would be an ideal vehicle for ideology in general and that of nationalism in particular. Nations too are highly artificial coded constructs which seek to pass themselves off as somehow natural, of antiquated origin, stable and fixed. Therefore realism, which is employed not only by the realist novel but also by the newspaper, would be the narrative technique of choice of one wishing to propagate nationalism.

For Amitav Ghosh, language in the process of the production of art attains the status of diasporic representation – voicing him and thousands of other uprooted individuals. Language embodies the attempt to create family that has broken and dispersed in the mire of confused identity. Ghosh acknowledges it in *The Shadow Lines*:-

You see, in our family we don't know whether we're coming or going – it's all my grandmother's fault. But of course, the fault was n't hers at all: it lay in the language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (*The Shadow Lines*, 153)

This is a language that Ghosh believes in and this kind of language he tries to create in his work. Postmodernists reject elaborate formal aesthetics in favour of minimalist designs. Amitav Ghosh does not give any significance for picturesque description and ornamental use of language. Tabish khair comments on this as Ghosh is very careful in his use of English and vernacular transcriptions. He develops a conscious and rich tradition in Indian English fiction, a tradition that includes R.K. Narayan and Shashi Deshpande. The attempt is not to stage Indian Englishes. Ghosh avoids the aestheticisation of language. (Tabish khair, p.108) Postmodernists defend the cause of feminists. Uma, Amitav Ghosh's character, is a perfect example of this. Uma is a break from the traditional women characters. She is a political activist who travels around the country to dissipate the patriotic spirits. Blurring of genres, one of the postmodern traits, can be witnessed in the writings of Amitav Ghosh. He disfigures by blending many

genres. Girish Karnad rightly said about him, “ Ghosh uses to great effect a matrix of multiple points of view in which memory, mythology and history freely interpenetrate A delight to read” (Indian Express). The Glass palace is not only a novel but also romance, narrative fiction, adventure fiction, and historical fiction. He combines all the elements of a novel to create fragmentation.

Ghosh uses the romantic genre to chart the characters who reflect on the history of colonialism in Burma and the formation of the present Myanmar nation. It is also a narrative fiction that employs a complex spiral narrative structure to texture many characters’ identities and experiences in the world where we live in. It can be read in historical point of view, since it is portraiture of history and document of nation. Ghosh invents the third person narrator who relates a story in a spiral fashion that fictionalizes and makes real historical subject and event. The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) is “not only a medical thriller but also a Victorian ghost story, a scientific quest, a unique mixture of a ‘whodunit thriller’, and a poltergeist tale”.

Narrative technique is the way one writes a particular work. Narrative technique changes or influences the readers. It can greatly increase or decrease the interest of the readers. In childhood children ask their elders to tell them stories. Children react accordingly, if stories are told with gestures. The narrative style replaces gestures and heightens the effect of that particular work. The narrative technique used by him is unique in which the novelist himself does not tell the story to the readers but employs a narrator, sometimes nameless and sometimes named, to tell the story. The narrator created by the novelist does not only narrate the story of the main characters but at the same time keeps commenting on the contemporary society. He also presents to the readers the places he visits.

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