

## Language, Form and the Question of Representation in Postmodern Fictions

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 28 February 2018

#### Keywords

Postmodernism, Subversion, Representation, Referential Problems, and Hybridity

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### ABSTRACT

*It is construed that the postmodern problem of representation is reflected in the two sections of the fiction: form and language. Both form and language are the vehicles of representation and because of that, both form and language are questioned/subverted in the process of representation. The narrative problems in form and the referential problem in language take place in the fiction through multiple ways. Different authors utilize diverse approaches to the same representational problem. Postmodern authors from America such as Pynchon, John Barth, Paul Auster, and E L Doctorow; Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Saul Bellow; African American novelists such as Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor; British Indian writer Salman Rushdie; Italian writers Italo Calvino, and Alberto Eco; and Canadian writers Robert Kroetsch, and Margaret Attwood contextualize the representational problems in terms of their local culture and issues.*

All these postmodern writers have their own individual postmodern style, which differs from one another. Their purpose is to subvert both the conventional credibility of language and form in the quest of representation, but the approach to carry out the process is different in the works of various postmodern writers. For example, the approach of Italo Calvino is essentially different from any other postmodern American writer or any Latin American writer for that matter. But the common element is that the postmodern writers narrate this problem of representation in their fictions.

In Calvino's *If on a winter's Night a Traveller*, both the language play combining with the narratorial play, which thwarts the conventional beginning of the novel, and an involvement of the reader are identified. Here, the play is a holistic play that functions as a catalyst to an entire creation and reception of the novel. Both language and form combine collectively to present referential problems of the postmodern fiction. The self-referentiality of the novel, which involves the reader in the process of the novel, leads to an endless beginning that perpetually prolongs the span of this collective play. The narrator opens the lines, "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade" (3). It is not just a metafictional quality, which can be found in any modern book, but the sincere involvement of the reader in this metafictional play by literally making him one of the characters in it makes the novel a suitable example of the postmodern referential problem.

Not just Calvino, but most of the postmodern writers narrate the stories in the same lines. The writers like Umberto Eco, who, with his semiotic play in his *The Name of the Rose*, complicates the representation or narration in the novel, and D M Thomas in his *The White Hotel* stalls the representation by blurring or mixing several genres at the same time.

Generally, the postmodern fiction deals with this post-structural view of language. Similar examples in numerous

other works can be seen. In *What the Crow Said*, an irony in the usage of language can be seen. For example, JG never utters even a single word, let alone using language. On the other hand, the crow can speak the human language fluently. Indeed, his usage of language is limited to curses and bad omens. But the juxtaposition of the soundless/speechless human character with the fluent crow creates a stark irony of the postmodern language. On certain occasions, Kroetsch narrates JG's communication pattern, "JG, locked up in the parlor, hearing the men return was excited beyond all reason; but he couldn't speak a sound. He farted loudly out of pure joy" (129). Similar case is found in Vera's boy with his unusual language, which cannot be comprehended. When he says, "Erellthay be nowsay in the orningmay" (120), the reader cannot understand the meaning of the words. However, the characters within the novel can comprehend it somehow. The writer creates linguistic gaps, which resist all the signifiers or create ample of them, and in both the cases comprehension and interpretation is stalled. His language remains the same throughout the novel, letting the reader play the guessing game of what he says. This linguistic stases or gaps can be attributed to what Derrida has said of 'aporia'.

Postmodern fiction, indeed, deals with the post-structural problems or notions of language, but the approach of different writers towards this referential problem is different. Both Calvino and Kroetsch narrate this linguistic notion in their fiction, but the ways are different, for example, Calvino plays with the multiplicity of signifiers and questions, as Derrida did, the signifiers' relationship with the final signifieds (commonly attributed in language usage), and Kroetsch creates 'aporia' in his narration and shows its inability to convey the message. Not only Kroetsch, who presents resistance to the final signified in any form, but also Paul Auster in his *City of Glass*, appears to do the same. For example, the conversation between Peter and Quinn is something worth noting. The conversation between mentally retarded Peter and Quinn is an example of this ironical inability of language to represent reality or meaning. At one point Peter uses some private and unknown words to

Quinn. Peter says, “Wimble click crumblechawbeloo. Clack clackbedrack. Numb noise, flacklemuch, chewmanna. Ya, ya, ya. Excuse me. I am the only one who understands these words” (17). It is not only the point that Peter uses his private words that are not understood by Quinn, but also the point that he makes that his reality cannot be expressed through the existing words. Indeed, their approaches are different, but the purpose to defy the connection between the signifiers and the final signifieds remains the same.

The referential problem of language coupled with the narratorial problem reiterates the inability to begin or to end for that matter. Calvino’s novel, just as language, becomes depthless with only surfaces. Calvino from the beginning to the end keeps the story ironically stalled and yet moving. The story goes nowhere except exposing its own self-referential problems or metafictional play. The writer himself confesses that, “instead the sentences continue to move in vagueness, greyness, in a kind of no man’s land of experience reduced to the lowest common denominator” (12). The narrator or in other words the writer himself does not fix the novel to fixities as the movement of the novel simply wavers in the narratorial play. The narrator does not impose fixed meanings to the sentences or does not guide the novel to just one direction. In fact, the novel moves in a circular way going nowhere. The narrator mentions his dilemma: “Where would I go out to? The city outside there has no name yet, we don’t know if it will remain outside the novel or whether the whole story will be contained within its inky blackness” (14). Ironically, the narrator identifies with the general ignorance of the reader. The “we” in the quotation suggests this phenomenon. This unreliability or helplessness, as opposed to the godlike superiority of the realist fiction, is found in numerous postmodern fiction. John Fowls presents a similar narratorial dilemma or impotency in his *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Self-referentiality or metafiction coupled with the impotency of a narrator in terms of the plot and characterization can be seen on many occasions. Just like Calvino, he directly addresses the reader and narrates the dilemma:

You may think novelists always have fixed plans to which they work, so that the future predicted by Chapter One is always inexorably the actuality of Chapter Thirteen. But novelists write for countless different reasons: for money, for fame, for reviewers, for parents, for friends, for loved ones; for vanity, for pride, for curiosity, for amusement: as skilled furniture makers enjoy making furniture, as drunkards like drinking, as judges like judging, as Sicilians like emptying a shotgun into an enemy’s back (86).

He, by addressing to the reader, defies the conventional authority assigned to either the narrator or the writer. He further narrates the impotency or helplessness with regard to how the characters behave. He posits:

We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. When Charles left Sarah on her cliff edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy (86-7).

He opposes the idea of presenting a planned world pertaining to narrating the novelistic world. In other words, he denies the superiority of the narrator as well as finality in terms of the authorial creativity. Here, the playful narrator admits its lack of control over the characters, who take actions on their own, and the narrator is reduced to be a mere witness. He mentions the point when the protagonist takes his own route independent of the narrator/author, “That is certainly one explanation of what happened; but I can only report – and I am the most reliable witness – that the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself” (87). The similar role of a narrator is seen in Calvino’s novel as well. In *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, two courses are found running in the same pace: language and form working together to deconstruct the notion of linearity, transparency, comprehension, interpretation, and the notions of fixities, unity and totality.

The lack of trust in language, as it becomes an unreliable source in the postmodern world, is mentioned by Umberto Eco in the beginning of his novel *The Name of the Rose*. He suggests the godlike status of language with absolute assurance is a matter of the past. He ironically narrates the status of language from the context of the postmodern world:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This was beginning with God and the duty of every faithful monk would be to repeat everyday with chanting humility the one never-changing event whose incontrovertible truth can be asserted. But we see now through a glass darkly, and the truth, before it is revealed to all, face to face, we see in fragments (alas, how illegible) in the error of the world, so we must spell out its faithful signals even when they seem obscure to us and as if amalgamated with a will wholly bent on evil (3).

Eco in the novel presents an unusual language play deconstructing the entire process of meaning generation. However, the patterns and approaches of both Eco and Calvino are different. For example, Calvino utilizes the partnership of the reader in this deconstructive process, and Eco carries out his process through semiotic play. Eco’s semiotic play is fathomed in the following statements of the narrator, “I have never doubted the truth of signs, Adso; they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. What I did not understand was the relation among signs” (599). Calvino establishes an unusual relationship between the reader and the narrator, in which the narrator seeks the reader’s partnership not only in the functioning of the novel but also in all the narratorial devices that are prompted in the novel. The reader becomes one of the characters who also partakes in the collective play endorsed by Calvino in the novel. Every now and then, the narrator calls upon the reader seeking his/her partnership in the building of the novel. In fact, the writer in the functioning and development of the novel directly refers the reader.

Representational problems pertaining to language and form, instead of narrating, simplifying, and presenting things, complicates the entire process of representation. It is not only the language, but also the form that distorted or subverted. There are many instances in the novel during which both language and form are ironized and subverted, or the conventional usage relating to them is questioned. Except the fact that all the writers have different agendas and purposes, major postmodern writers represent the question of

representation while questioning the unity in form and the referentiality in language. For example, feminist writers approach language with an altogether different agenda. Traditionally, language is modified/ appropriated keeping in view of the centrality of the patriarchal condition of the society. In other words, “the entire official resources of language have long been appropriated by men and have in turn been associated with them” (Davey 81). As a result, the first tendency available for the feminist writers is to deconstruct the biased stance in language. And hence, “what remains most available to someone who would write as woman are parodies and subversions of official discourse, ungrammatical and non-generic fracturing of it, or the muse’s silence to which women have usually been relegated” (Davey 81). Similar practices can be found in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, in which ungrammatical sentences can be found as a revolt against the male centered language. For example, the sentence “I won’t say things are rosy,” says I” (55) suggests a deliberate mistake in the statement. Calvino, on the contrary, deconstructs language in an altogether different way. Indeed, both Calvino and Carter attempt to present the representational or referential problem, but for different causes. Similarities and differences can be identified in both language and form of their fictions.

This suggests that the novelists from all over the world, categorized as postmodern, equally adapt the referential problems. It is worth noting that the feminists, post-colonial novelists, and other writers of the margins explore this linguistic possibility as a weapon to deconstruct the existing metanarratives or the dominant forces of the postmodern society. For example, in *Midnight’s Children*, Salman Rushdie presents an unreliable narrator who plays with both the form of fiction and the content of history. Feminist writers like Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, and Aritha van Herk deploy postmodernism in their novels to contest the metanarratives such as patriarchy. This spirit of questioning and its subsequent subversiveness of postmodernism allow the postmodern feminist works to narrate their own stories and deconstruct the conventional metanarratives. Hutcheon has rightly mentioned in this regard, “while feminisms and postmodernism have both worked to help us understand the dominant modes of representation at work in our society, feminists have focused on the specifically female subject of representation and have begun to suggest ways of challenging and changing those dominants in both mass culture and high art” (Poetics of Postmodernism 78). She further asserts that, “postmodern parodic and ironic representational strategies have offered feminist artists an effective way of working within and yet challenging dominant patriarchal metanarrative discourses” (Poetics of Postmodernism 79).

It is worth noting that postmodernism does not approve of any metanarrative and can be dangerous for the core ideology of the feminists as it can go against their own grain. But saving this incredulity towards metanarratives, postmodernism provides a lethal weapon to deconstruct all the other metanarratives. The feminists cannot create their own metanarrative. That is why postmodernism is more of an ideological and a theoretical enterprise whereas feminism is a social enterprise. Subsequently, feminist writers employ their politics of feminism using the weaponry of postmodernism. Aritha van Herk, for example, in her *No Fixed Address* employs postmodern narrative strategies such as the mixture of multiple point of views, discontinuous narrative, and an unreliable narrator. In fact, the novel employs the third person narrative in general, but at certain intervals calling them as “notebook on a missing person”, she employs a second person

narrative with an altogether different line of plot. She directly refers to “you” and narrates, “You see, it is easy to find out about Archane’s past, only too easy. She has a record, after all. And if there’s anything missing, Lanie will fill in the spaces. She likes nothing better” (183). Margaret Atwood employs the same postmodern narrative strategies to question not only the patriarchy, but also all the other male-centered structures. In *surfacing or in The Handmaid’s Tale*, the woman’s struggle against the larger and dominant forces of society is narrated.

Frank Davey has commented in this regard that the postmodern narratives of Margaret Atwood express issues pertaining to women. He suggests that, “not simply as woman versus man but as woman versus the ideology of capitalism (*The Edible Woman*), woman versus the mythology of patriarchy (*Power Politics*), woman imbricated into the environment and facing ‘environmental abuse’ (*Surfacing*), woman as archetypal victims of totalitarian government (*True Stories and The Handmaid’s Tale*)” (69). It can be said that postmodern feminism unleashes a larger attack on all the metanarratives through the deconstruction of both language and form. Except that there are differences in the purposes and agendas, all the postmodern works, with reference to the postmodern spirit, fall in the line of subversiveness and plurality. For example, Calvino’s narrative falls in line with any postmodern female writer, irrespective of their purposes. The fusion of multiple points of view is found in both Aritha van Herk’s *No Fixed Address and If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*.

Donald Barthelme in his *The Dead Father* narrates overtly the problems of language in the contemporary era. He literary deconstructs the sentence patterns to highlight the utopia of stable signified. This linguistic deconstruction can be seen in one of his excerpts:

AndI.EndI.Great  
endifarceteeterteetertottering. Williturt. I  
reiterate. Don't be cenacle. Conscientia mille testes.  
And having made them, where now? what now?  
Mensagitatmolem and I wanted to doitwell,  
doitwell. Elegantemente.Ohe! jamsatis, AndI.  
Pathetically the bumgrab night and date through  
all the heures for the good of all.The Father's Day to  
end all.AndI understand but list, list, let's go back.  
To the wetbedding.To the  
dampdream.AndIaoneohsevenyearold boy, just like  
the rest of them. Pitterpatter. I  
reiterate&reiterate&reiterate&reiterate, pitter-patter  
(81).

Representational problems narrated by Calvino and other postmodern writers may have differences in respect of the narratorial play. For example, D M Thomas utilizes an altogether different way to suggest the representational problems. In his novels, endless noting of footnotes is found, which cannot be found in a conventional novel. It is this problem of representation or an ironization of representation that the writers are motivated to narrate in the novel through footnotes. The footnotes provide additional information in the novel. Thomas expresses in *The White Hotel*, “1 Though for the most part her uncle is the “chef”: from the white naval cap which he used to wear jokingly – calling himself the “chief” to her father’s “Captain”; and from his huge appetite which had stuck in her armory” (141).

Similar phenomena can be found in the stories of Borges. He narrates the stories through the bibliography and a series of footnotes. In his story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”,

he extensively takes recourse to both footnotes and includes bibliography in the main text of the story. In fact, he builds the story out of these phenomena. In one of the footnotes, he notes, “\*I also had the secondary intention of sketching a personal portrait of Pierre Menard. But how could I dare to compete with the golden pages which, I am told, the Baroness de Bacourt is preparing or with the delicate and punctual pencil of CarolusHourcade?” (65). In the cases of Calvino, Borges, and D M Thomas, It can be fathomed that postmodern fiction deforms the form in an ironical quest of representation and complicates further with the referential problem of language: the play of signifiers devoid of the final signified.

The fusion of multiple points of view is a common phenomenon in postmodern fiction. Many postmodern writers display this technique as a move to thwart unity and totality of fiction. Paul Auster’s *Invisible* is a novel stuffed with plural aspects. The novel varies from first person narrative, second person narrative, and third person narrative. This suggests that postmodern fiction is prone to loosening or contesting the conventional boundaries of traditional fiction. Along with multiple points of view, multiple narrators in a single novel are also found in postmodern fictions. In *10:01*, Lance Olsen displays multiple narrators with their micro-narratives. The writer deconstructs the phenomenon of realistic representation by subverting the metanarrative of a single narrative with a powerful narrator that can capture and represent reality in its original form. The writer offers multiple micro-narratives that present individual stories with different styles such as surreal, speculative, comic, lyrical, stream-of-consciousness. These multiple narrators with different points of view resist or stall the phenomenon called representation in postmodern fictions.

The narratorial play, just like Calvino, in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is also interesting as the narrator/author switches over his role from a narrator to the character within the novel. Generally, a novel has a narrator who is either a character within the novel and remains the same throughout the novel (in case of the conventional novels) or the author who remains outside the story and directs it in an authoritative way. But in this novel the narrator switches his role between the character within the story and the narrator outside the story. This breaks the conventionality of the narrative form of the novel. The postmodern works flout the conventional forms using different ways. Both Calvino and Fowles are different in terms of their narrative techniques, but their purpose to defy the unity and fixities of the form remains the same.

Both form and language unleash the crusade to stall the interpretive forces within and outside the novel. The formal play and the linguistic play halts the conventional meaning generation process of the novel. In doing so, the novel, at times, goes against its own grain. Objective truth, clear-cut reality, and simple meanings are subverted through the referential problem in language, and it is further complicated by the narrative carnival. The writer suggests it in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, “behind the written page is the void: the world exists only as artifice, pretense, misunderstanding, falsehood” (239), which leads to the notion that “writing is undecipherable” (242), for it contains only traces that lead to another traces without reaching any firm conclusion.

Postmodern fictions such as *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *Naked Lunch*, *What the Crow Said*, *The Studhorse Man*, *The Name of the Rose*, and *City of Dark Magic* thwart the interpretive nature of the fiction by disrupting linearity and

continuity of form. In *City of Dark Magic* (2012), Magnus Flyte narrates a complex narrative upsetting all the conventional norms. Similar case is found in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, in which Marquez rejects linearity and continuity in favour of discontinuity and disruption that resists realist interpretive nature and easy reading of the reader. Marquez presents a circular, often repetitive, and complex narrative. Pynchon in his *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and V. narrates discontinuous threads of multiple stories, wherein it becomes a difficult task for the reader to fathom continuity and linearity. For instance, in V., the narrator presents a disruptive story with incomplete details, and the writer only creates an inconclusive story with multiple possibilities. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, an apparently simple story of Kurt Vonnegut puzzles the reader with uneven plot and its abruptness.

Calvino complicates the relationship between the work of art, its creator, and the concept of authorship or originality. Different writers of the postmodern era have shown the same author-work dilemma in a different way. Kroatsch has equally narrated the same doubts over the authorship. Salat states, “Kroetsch problematizes the concept of the author and authorship in his novels by both using and abusing the idea of the author that obtains in inherited traditions. The author traditionally has been seen as the organizing principle who with his God-like omniscience knows the end before he begins and towards that end he begins (“Sub-versions and Contra-dictions” 29).

Calvino, Angela Carter, Robert Kroetsch, Aritha van Herk, D M Thomas and Jeanette Winterson employ this playful narrator who does not either have the all-know power of the realistic narrator or have the power to narrate the stories in an objective and reliable way. In *Written on the Body*, Winterson employs a similar narrator who disrupts the process of narration and subverts the realistic claims with relation to the objective and authentic presentation of the world. At the end of the story, the narrator mentions this playfulness that questions its own reliability: “I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator.” (24).

The same problem with the end can be found in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, which offers multiple endings. Defying the conventional ideology of the form, the writer opts to provide three endings to the same story and asks the reader to choose one from them. The novel portrays a conventional love triangle between Charles as a protagonist, Sarah, a woman with modern perspective and Ernestina, a woman with Victorian ideology. The writer presents all the three options: the conventional end by putting together Charles with Ernestina; the end may not be the ideal one but suitable for any conventional writer to go ahead with as it appeals to the popular taste, the second end pertaining to the protagonist’s desire to marry Sarah is placed in which Sarah’s individual freedom is sacrificed and proves to be an another conventional end, and the third end comes with the option of keeping both Charles and Sarah separated and it allows both the characters to lead their individual pursuits against the backdrop of existential philosophy. The readers are given the final authority to choose anyone as per their individual tastes. This shows the postmodern play with the end, and a similar kind of play is seen in Calvino’s novel in which the end is literally denied by presenting only beginnings of various stories.

In *Calendar of Regrets*, Olsen presents multiple genres and creates a hybrid culture in the novel, in which the writer fuses the thriller story, mystery, fantasy, mythical story, and an erotic

story. Along with multiple genres, the narratorial play rejects the stable notions regarding the representation. Donald Barthelme in his *The Dead Father* narrates goes into an extreme by rejecting the ideas of cohesive plot. In the story, the writer does not follow the conventional plot structure and narrates the novel through a series of revelations, unrelated stories, anecdotes, dialogues, dreamlike snapshots of reality, and personal rendering of the characters' impressions or recordings. Along with the formal carnival, the writer, too, deconstructs language by presenting deconstructed sentences and rejecting the stability in the meaning generation system.

Umberto Eco uses the form of a detective novel in *The Name of the Rose* and ends up being an anti-detective novel. It is rightly mentioned with reference to the novel that "in *The Name of the Rose*, Eco uses the form of detective fiction to deconstruct, disrupt and undermine the rationality of the models of conjecture conventionally provided by the form" (Cheek and Gough 304). In *City of Dark Magic*, Flyte narrates a story that does not fit into any single genre. The postmodern novel assumes multiple genres simultaneously and resists to be categorized into a single genre. Just like Calvino's novel, *City of Dark Magic*, too, assumes the form of historical fiction, spy fiction, magic realist fiction, and romantic fiction simultaneously. The conventional narrative framework does not fit into postmodern fictions. Postmodern writers like Flyte,

Eco, Pynchon, and Calvino toy the conventional narrative frame by flouting its norms.

The postmodern novel questions the credibility of reason with which the detective attempts to search the truth; and the failure of the detective is synonymous with the failure of rationality and its inadequateness in the postmodern society. Auster's *The City of Glass*, a detective genre, portrays the character of the private investigator Quinn, who in search of the truth of the case goes insane. Auster shows the insufficiency of language and reason as adequate tools for the epistemological or ontological quests, and in doing so, the narrator flouts the norms of the detective genre.

One of the reasons behind this postmodern deconstruction of the form is to negate the forces of rationality and metanarrative. Postmodernism always seeks to deconstruct the rationality in one way or the other. This negation of rationality, thus, leads to discontinuous narrative, blurring of the various sub-genres of fiction, making the fusion of multiple genres, and non-linear representation. These are indicative of the postmodern negation of the supremacy of rationality and its hegemony in the postmodern world.

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