

The Postmodern Interpretation of Suneet Chopra's Story, 'A Strand of Cotton'

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 10 January 2019

Keywords

Postmodern, story, paramount, interest

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to interpret the story, 'A Strand Cotton' by Suneet Chopra in light of postmodernism. The idea is to exploit the observations of Lyotard, Heywood and Carter to interpret the story. Heywood observes that postmodernism came into existence with industrialisation, market-oriented capitalist economies, new social classes, democracy, and the *Enlightenment* values, like reason and progress. In Carter's observation, postmodernism undermines the dominant and central arguments of Western thought, such as language, identity, origin, voice, and mind. In addition, it prefers to use the mechanisms of dispersal, uncertainty, disagreement and westernisation. Lyotard further adds that "Post-Modernism favours seeing the world in more rhetorical terms as a field of contending smaller narratives, where people strive to make their point of view and their interests paramount by making their narratives more convincing".

In my opinion Prabhat's rhetorical arguments, questions and answers have strength against the announcement of the established systems of behaviour. He carries on, "You say the Devi will kill me if I break this thread? I have heard this from childhood. See then if she does." He pulls the string off and breaks it. He rolls up the thread and throws it to an untouchable woman sitting by the wall. "Go and sew your clothes with it, sister. It's more useful that way," he adds defiantly. He feels a new power arise in him. For him, the thread is like a snake, that has died for him and become irrelevant. This is like a rebirth for Prabhat and he is now a casteless being, typically postmodern.

The focus of the paper is to interpret the story, 'A Strand Cotton', written by Suneet Chopra, in the theoretical context of postmodernism. Heywood observes that postmodernism came into existence with industrialisation, market-oriented capitalist economies, new social classes, democracy, and the *Enlightenment* values, like reason and progress. In Carter's observation, postmodernism undermines the dominant and central arguments of Western thought, such as language, identity, origin, voice, and mind. In addition, it prefers to use the mechanisms of dispersal, uncertainty, disagreement and westernisation. This idea of postmodern philosophy has been exploited for reference in the interpretation of the story, 'A Strand of Cotton'. To interpret certain situations, such as reactions of Prabhat after the murder of Sita Ram, Lyotard's idea that "Post-Modernism as a scepticism toward "metanarratives", has also been contextualized for reference. According to Lyotard, the "Metanarratives" are the "stories about the world that summarise" it in one account. The post-modern attitudes comprehend "such conclusive stories unsuited to the world". Lyotard further adds that "Post-Modernism favours seeing the world in more rhetorical terms as a field of contending smaller narratives, where people strive to make their point of view and their interests paramount by making their narratives more convincing". The argument is that the notions about postmodernism, discussed above, may happen to be novice in the cultural and philosophical history or tradition of the Europe. However, the ideas can be identified and located in the stories, like 'A Strand of Cotton', which represent literary and cultural practices or themes.

A brief biographical introduction about the author of the story may be relevant here to form an understanding around

the themes of the stories written by him. Suneet Chopra was born at Lahore, Pakistan, in 1941. He had qualities of a creative writer during his student days. He got influenced by Marxism, which turned him into a social activist. His stories got published in the magazines and periodicals of national and international repute. His works were also published with eminent writers and philosophers of the time, such as Foucault, Goldman, Levi-Straus, Lacan, Goldman etc. His stories have also been translated into Hindi, Tamil, French, and other international languages. He has also authored a book of his own stories, *Transactions and Other Stories* in 1984.

The biographical introduction of the author reflects that he has awareness and wisdom to envision the themes and issues, such as casteism and classism, he raised in his stories. 'A Strand of Cotton' is a story of school teacher who is a brahmin by cast. He privately gives lessons to a low cast boy, Sita Ram, to earn extra-money in order to fulfil his domestic needs. However this has become a matter of constant objection by the village headman, Ram Singh, Rehlu and other villagers of upper-cast clan. Although, the teacher against all the odds, exposes them yet he himself cannot get rid of his upper-cast identity, symbolized by the sacred thread round his chest. He remains attached to the traditional faith and sprouting doubt till he completely gets disillusioned with it. When his student Sita Ram is murdered by Rehlu and his gangsters, he breaks the thread and frees himself from the decayed idea of high-cast identity. The village headman tries to save and defend the murderers. However, in the new light of awareness, the teacher motivates the low cast people to rise against the

traditional law and to follow the law of the country common to all.

In my opinion, Prabhat's acts, such as teaching a low cast person and motivating the low cast people against the oppressions, on the basis of religion and cast, are an expression of postmodern attitude. As, these actions, teaching and motivations the 'shudras' are in a way rejection and opposition of the 'dominant' ways of prescriptive behaviour, based on casteism and religion. Prabhat begins doubting the prescriptive behaviour when he is not only constantly reminded but also warned to mend his ways of living by the village head man and his uncle. "How dare you prostitute your wisdom like this?" Ram Singh, the village headman would burst out. "Don't you remember the example of Drona, the greatest of gurus? When Eklavya the untouchable learnt the art of archery, he took his thumb from him as payment; but you our guru, have educated this Dom further than most of the twice-born in the village. What sort of guru are you?" "You are playing with dangerous powers, my son," his uncle Jai Narayan Joshi would confide in him when ever matter came to his head. "Do you not know that educating untouchables is a dangerous thing? Was it not necessary to for Rama to kill Shambuka, a shudra, and put an end to hi unnatural meditation? Surely you know that. The Ramayana begins with it. And you call yourself a scholar" ('A Strand of Cotton').

Instead Prabhat prefers to use the mechanisms of dispersal, uncertainty and disagreement, discussed previously in the first paragraph of this paper. He categorically refutes to be 'great' like the 'Drona' and denounces the prescribed way of becoming similar to the traditional iconic exemplary human figures. These are the characteristic features of postmodernism. He also builds his own narrative of his life and the attitude of others. "But I have to live", he used to protest, "None of your sons is interested in studying. All that interests them is wine and women. And Dom women at that!" This situation, argument and the attitude disturbs the people, representing the established system. "See", they would cry out. "Now you are defending your living on immoral earnings, and you a Brahmin." The counter argument and questions further conform to Prabhat's postmodern attitude. "Is it living on immoral earnings only when I teach a Dom to read and write? When you take the same earnings as interest on debt or as rent, it is all right. Who is there among respectable in this village who does not live off the earnings of prostitution?"

The construction of narratives, in one's favour is another uniqueness of postmodernism, which can be observed in the ideas previously stated in the first paragraph (Lyotard). As Lyotard further adds that "Post-Modernism favours seeing the world in more rhetorical terms as a field of contending smaller narratives, where people strive to make their point of view and their interests paramount by making their narratives more convincing". Even the people, representing the established system make narratives, while exploiting present happenings

and instances to favour it. This can be observed in the speech of the village headman. "A young man of our village has been killed. There are hot heads among youth". This situation yields a commotion among the untouchables because they feel that the matter is being repeated time and again. Observing this, the headman utters, "In matters of this sort it is difficult to apportion the blame. Who raised his hand first? Who hit whom and that sort of thing". The headman intones unprovoked. "Some say he struck the temple priest, some say he was innocent. We know only that he was surrounded and killed by the mob. We have both versions. So which one are we to believe?" The headman continues with the same narrative about the incident. "He is a son of our village". "But who has killed him? There must be fifteen here who rained blows on him-or more. If anyone is prepared to name the killer I am prepared to take the matter up with the police". Having seen that there is no counter argument yet, he extends his narrative. "I see that no one disagrees with me. So we can settle the matter according to our custom. Manu, our lawgiver – the great lawgiver has settled the blood money due to each cast."

Prabhat's response to this narrative is typically postmodern. He has fresh narratives, based on the ideas, such as disagreement, new social classes, democracy and the *Enlightenment* values, like reason and progress. Prabhat feels suffocated. "Stop" he cries out all of a sudden. There are angry exclamations but he is unstoppable now. "There is a law in the land," he says "A law that is same for all the castes. There is no reason to go back to our customary law. And to know we can get into trouble with the authorities for this kind of thing." Then Prabhat adventures with the rhetorical questions to make his narrative convincing. "What makes twice-born? Have you thought of it? He pulls out the limp thread that hung round his chest. "Just this thread. This is what makes me a Brahmin and Sita Ram a an untouchable, isn't it? A piece of thread probably spun by some untouchable in a cotton mill at Kanpur, isn't it?" The people, supporting the traditional faith have no other argument except to announce Prabhat's disagreement, as an insult to the faith. "Blasphemy," gasped the temple priest who had given evidence against Sita Ram, "The Devi will kill you for it".

However, Prabhat's substantial arguments, rhetorical questions and appropriate answers have strength against the announcement of the priest. "I want you to see how little strength is left in your beliefs now," he carries on, "You say the Devi will kill me if I break this thread? I have heard this from childhood. See then if she does." He pulls the string off and breaks it. He rolls up the thread and throws it to an untouchable woman sitting by the wall. "Go and sew your clothes with it, sister. It's more useful that way," he adds defiantly. He feels a new power arise in him. For him, the thread was like a snake, that had died on him now and had become irrelevant. This was like a rebirth for Prabhat and he was now a casteless being, conclusively postmodern.

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