

Elements of postmodernism in *The Act of Love***Mrs Puja Thakur.**

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Abstract

The Act of Love is a story of a neurotic, sex obsessed person, who wants his wife to be unfaithful to him. It revolves around a man's determined attempts to provoke his wife to infidelity. The novel offers an interesting insight into a postmodern British society. There are three main characters on which the entire action focuses. We have Felix Quinn, an antiquarian bookseller, his wife Marisa and a serial seducer of women Marius. Felix Quinn shows an intense and rabid love towards his wife that proves dangerous to him and his partner both. He consciously and purposefully establishes the connection between his love and his literariness. He continually refers to the famous authors who have written that jealousy is compulsory in true love to legitimize his own desire. Indeed there is a perverse connection between desire and the literature that he refers to. The self-reflective mode of the paranoid / schizoid self is considered in a way, as the protagonist of the novel. The novel presents a dark satirical humour on the psychologically drained post-war western civilization. It is the picture of a civilization that is choking under the surplus waste of matter and information of its own making.

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The elemental traits of post-modernism are obviously present in the novel *The Act of Love*. Post modernism favours looking at the world in more rhetorical terms as a field of contending smaller narrative, where people strive to make their point of view and their interest paramount by making their narratives more convincing. We witness the same in *The Act of Love*. We have a definite and distinct story but at the same time, we also have a multitude of different stories which is an excellent example of intertextuality, and presents a kaleidoscopic view of events and experiences encountered by the characters of the book.

Characterization is another building block of postmodern novels. In most of the postmodern novels, characterization is complex. It takes a lot of time for the reader to know the characters. In addition to this, the author introduces too many characters in the novel, who have no relevance as such. They just appear and disappear. The same is seen in *The Act of Love* too. The readers struggle to know and remember who emerge and vanish in the novel with no purpose. Other familiar themes in any literature characterized as postmodern are playfulness, irony, pastiche, schizophrenia, paranoia and dark humour. In *The Act of Love*, paranoia is a recurring theme that occurs throughout the novel. In a world that is too familiar to offer anything new, paranoia is a condition of the self that imagines that something beyond the ordinary is still possible.

Postmodern writers' explorations are based on the opposition between real world and the world of fiction. Dispersed with the ontological questions, it brings with itself "the paradox concerning the identity of fictional characters and the status of literary fictional discourse (the problem of referentiality)" (Waugh 90). Felix's story gives us a feeling of fantasy. Rather than

the retelling of actual facts, it looks like a surreal twisting of Felix's imagination. The reader is unable to understand Felix's overactive sexual cogitations or his reality within the story world. The reader gets involved in Felix's self-absorption, his quaint and orthogonal mental world. Felix, however, does not seem to be a reliable narrator. As he tries more and more to manipulate his wife, narration becomes more and more fragmented. Complexity of the narrative, the product of a deeply self-reflexive mind, moves beyond the world of objective material reality into regions of the unconscious where faith, irrationality and fear of the unknown reign supreme.

Jacobson uses nonlinear timeline in *The Act of Love*. The memory links the past to the present and also to many of the characters. With the use of temporal distortion, a literary technique that uses a nonlinear timeline, Jacobson creates a world that appears magical. He jumps forwards or backwards in time. This time-travel creates an intricacy of sub-topics and plots. The traditional linear plot is replaced with a far more abstract form. Traditional literary elements such as a conclusive ending which satisfies the needs of both reader and character are absent. As a postmodernist narrative, *The Act of Love* is written in retrospect. The entire story is introduced in present time and the narrator talks about what happened previously.

Like a typical postmodernist text, the narrative in *The Act of Love* is fragmented. The novel lacks in coherence. Though it is written with Felix as the first person narrator but later some scenes are narrated by third person. The chapters merely display fragmented pieces of Felix's life. The fragmentation becomes more and more apparent as the plot progresses. Some chapters throw the reader into Felix's mind and one gets a frank and bold insight into exactly how close to a mental breakdown he is. These fragmented narrations function as a contrast to polarisation of the collected facade that Felix usually uses. Lyotard argues that knowledge and power has its offspring in the modernist idea of 'metanarratives' and 'grand-narratives' which construct the progress of a nation or society. However in the postmodern society, the ideology of 'grand-narrative' has transformed into the idea of profit through capitalism. The narration no longer serves as a united persuasion in order to gain power. The main theme of this novel is the protagonist's desire to connect to another person through love. His inability to achieve this goal stems from the dehumanization and resulting detachment from others, caused by what Jean

Baudrillard calls the simulations of reality. The destruction of simulacra and modes of reproduction, or what have come to replace reality and authentic relationships, is necessary for love in postmodern society. The postmodern neither seeks nor desires totality, unity or wholeness. Instead, there is an acceptance of fragmentation. Moreover postmodernism celebrates fragmentation by welcoming differences, localities and denies totalization. Antiheroes are a quintessential element of modernism, postmodernism and existentialism. In *The Act of Love*, Felix contains the qualities of an antihero. Although the breed of antiheroes entered the main stream of literature in roughly during and after the period of modernism, the concept was present even before. The idea of a hero who is flawed, weak, and possesses humane insecurities rather than epic virtues has fascinated many writers and readers alike. Antihero is a product of the postmodern socio-cultural condition. After Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* evolves another breed of antiheroes, Albert Camus inducted the idea of absurdity into the realm of existentialism and a new era for the antiheroes began. He proposes that absurdity springs from a man's relation to the world, existence of a human being in society is unfathomable and wholly absurd.

Who is an antihero? The answer to this question can be found by looking at different texts that claim to have an antiheroic character rather than an epic heroic character. What makes an antihero different from the tales of heroes and villains is his unique character. He has some of the qualities of a villain that at times borders brutality, cynicism, and ruthlessness, but with the soul or motivations of a more conventional hero. Many of the protagonists of Western and Eastern classical and mythological stories fit into the broad antihero mold, especially those who are shown as having turbulent, violent backgrounds and conflicting motivations. Frequently, it is the mental conflict that serves to link the discrete episodes which compose such stories. Such a connector is necessary due to the oral storytelling tradition that persists even today. On the secular front, the antihero has fared better and used at times as a mirror for social commentary and political critique. An antihero, however, is relegated to a secondary or fatal role in the story, skirting potentially negative attention. Swift's Gulliver had his fatal personality flaws and yet held fast to his attitudes. Although, he could easily represent any person buffeted by life's harshness, he is not exactly a character to model one's future life on. In later times, authors have

been bolder in their use of flawed heroes and even villains as key characters. An antihero is the principal character of a modern literary or dramatic work that lacks the attributes of the traditional protagonist. The anti-hero's lack of courage, honesty, grace, his weaknesses and confusions, often reflect modern man's ambivalence toward traditional, moral and social virtues. If we try to define the concept of antihero using certain specific traits, it may be said that in fiction, an anti-hero is a protagonist who is lacking the traditional heroic attributes and qualities, and instead possesses character traits that are antithetical to heroism. Typically, the anti-hero acts heroically, in scale and daring, but by methods, manners, and intentions fair and foul, even underhanded and deceitful. The word *anti-hero*, itself, is fairly recent; its principal definition has changed through the years. The 1940 edition of Merriam-Webster New International Dictionary listed anti-hero, but did not define it. Later sources would call the anti-hero a persona characterized by a lack of 'traditional' heroic qualities. Here, the resolution of external conflict is associated with attaining internal balance and peace. For example, Odysseus begins his 'Odyssey' torn as to whether to brave the sea to reclaim his throne or to remain on a blissful island in the passionate arms of a woman who is not his wife. It was only after passing through a series of legendary trials, he comes to the conclusion that home is where his heart and mind can be at peace. Apart from the charm of adventure, it were the emotional travails of Odysseus and his wife & son that kept Homer's audiences clamouring for more. The growth of powerful and organized religious movements and the rise of printing press produced less conflicted protagonists, with little of the bloodlust of their assumed predecessors. But even then, the protagonist like Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn was present. He was a self-described rascal, causing all sorts of trouble and even committing the crime according to the American law of the time of helping Jim, the runaway slave. With the increased use of emotionally unsettled characters, the propensity to leave a story incomplete with respect to characters' morality also increased. The antiheroes often exhibit some criminal behaviour and are both self-absorbed and depressed. Mid-20th century playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard showcased anti-heroic protagonists recognizable by their lack of identity and determination. Yet his frank portrait resonates with many people, despite the lack of any last-minute salvation or even a final

resolution of his many conflicts. In short it can be said that an antihero is anything but a simple cardboard cutout character.

Felix in *The Act of Love* may be called as the ultimate postmodern anti-hero. The novel starts with the meeting of Felix and Marius in the funeral of a professor. Felix comes to know that Marius has eloped with professor's wife Elspeth, who was "old enough to be his mother, not quite old enough to be his grandmother" (AL 18). Felix was curious to know about Marius and selected him as the hero of the play which he was going to write. Although Felix has not yet married Marisa, who will be the heroine of this play, he still finalises him as the lover of his wife. He supposes his interest in Marius and "apprehended the part he would play in that consummation" (AL 6). Felix observed that "he was as disordered sexually as I was" (AL 26). He had the hero of his play but he was still looking for the heroine and the plot of his play. He says that:

You loved not only expecting to lose but *in order* to lose-this my favourite books had told me and now I'd put them to the test in life I knew them to be right. You loved to lose and the more you loved the more you lost. (AL 12-13)

Felix is preoccupied with the idea that unfaithfulness in true love is compulsory. His childhood experiences have taught him that jealousy is important in love. When he was just fifteen, he was in love with a girl, who betrayed him. He remembers, "We went into the cinema together and she left two and a half hours later with someone else" (AL 9). "I rubbed at the pain in my heart. Probed it, polished it, until there was no skin left between my heart and me" (AL 11). This Childhood experience lies embedded in his consciousness latent and appears and reappears as drives and urges during his unguarded moments. After this affair he loses his faith in true love. To him, jealousy and love become so closely intertwined that they can't be separated. This incident affects Felix in such a way that he burnishes his disappointment and thinks that pain in love is a must. Felix proclaims that his specialty is "sexual insult", which he seeks and finds everywhere, eventually subjecting Marisa to multiple viewings of plays about betrayal.

Being an existentialist, Felix rejects all the established norms of the society on which the rules and regulations of human existence are based. He resists against all the thoughts and activities that modern societies circulate. He rejects all the binaries like truth/untruth, rationality/irrationality, love/hatred, pain/enjoyment etc., just to reveal the meaninglessness of life. He feels that reason and faith are both constructed by human beings to uphold a certain archaic lifestyle. Felix fails to live up to these Utopian notions and chooses an alternative lifestyle. The world has transformed because of the substantial ascendancy of the media and the great advancement in technology. In this postmodern world, we easily get influenced by the activities of the media. This, in turn, creates in our subconscious a simulated world, and we are simultaneously living both in the real and the simulated world. On account of this amazing advancement of information technology, multiculturalism is becoming a common matter. Such multidimensional society is creating multidimensional individuals. Everyone is getting moulded in a different order, according to his own choice. Such a multidimensional society that belongs to multidimensional people with differences in their choices is difficult to analyze. That is why, the postmodernists reject the scientific way of analyzing society. Although the word ‘simulacrum’ has been the centre of attention in describing and theorizing postmodernism, the word ‘simulacrum’ has its etymology in the Latin word ‘simulare’ which means to simulate, copy, or imitate. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard expands greatly on the idea of simulacra, proposing that humanity has formed some sort of hyper-reality that is perpendicular to the world we truly live in.

Felix is passionate about literature. Having no real life experiences upon which to base his hopes and expectations, he often relies on the conventions of novels and drama. The contrast between his expectations from life which are based on literature and the realities of the world he lives in is often great, and this divide further alienates Felix from society. The influence of literature in his life is apparent. Because Felix has internalised such literary conventions, he imagines himself to be the hero of his own story. It is for the same reason that he, attempts to sow the seeds of unfaithfulness in Marisa. Felix’s attempt appears quite ironic which becomes symptomatic of his desire to ‘live out’ literature in the real world.

The shaping of a text by another text is called intertextuality. In simplest terms, it may be explained as author's transforming or borrowing of text from any other work. Poststructuralist Julia Kristeva coined this term in 1966. She stated that 'the notion of intertextuality replaces the notion of intersubjectivity' when we realize that a meaning is not transferred from the author to reader directly. And if it is conveyed through a median or if it is conveyed through 'codes' imparted to the writer and reader by other texts, "intertextuality is nothing but a production within texts, rather than a difference or the relationship between the texts" ('Intertextuality').

Intertextuality can be categorized into three types that are hypertext, intertext and supertext. Though they come under textuality which deals with the text, the notion of supertext, hypertext and intertext is different. For Example, *The Great Indian Novel* which is written by Tharoor employs 'intertext' from Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*. For the concept of 'supertext' it combines female and male version of itself. For the concept of Hypertext it has links with different articles within itself. This can be said as another definition for intertextuality that is interconnection of thought flow, works and texts.

The terminology and the theory of intertextuality are new but the concept of interconnection and reference of text has been there in literature from ancient times. *The New Testament* passages and quotes are from *The Old Testament*. Most of the preaching or the answers of Jesus Christ in New Testament are the words of Old Testament. This interconnection later extends to paintings and poetry. Mythological and historical references are made in most of the works of art from the Greek, Latin and Roman records. Hence they have a textual network within them.

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