

## Unreliable Narrative in Akutagawa's Short Stories

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### Abstract

The research article discusses on the postmodern concept of Unreliable narrator by analyzing two of the significant short stories by the renowned Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa. The unreliable narrator is the one whose narration is seriously compromised owing to certain interests. Such a narrative is characterized by ambiguity, misjudgment manipulations and lies. This is a typical postmodern tool that establishes the deconstructionist view that there is no absolute truth or center. Here, the reliability in narration is highly problematic as there are multiple versions of truth existed in the discourse. Further, the short story contributed a new technique to the literary world, called Rashomon effect which is the contradictory interpretations of the same event by different people. This technique encapsulates so beautifully the key problems of the postmodern condition, i.e. the multiplicity and unreliability of different narratives.

**KEYWORDS:** Unreliable Narrator, Postmodernism, Rashomon Effect, Multiple truths, Ambiguity

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The technique of disturbing the usual perception of explicit truth is a postmodern phenomenon. The concept of Unreliable Narrator is such a postmodern invention which became popular after the 1960s. An unreliable narrator is a narrator whose credibility has been seriously compromised. The term was coined by Wayne C. Booth in 1961 in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Wayne C. Booth writes, "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work, unreliable when he does not"(159). Here the norms are implied author's norms.

There are unreliable narrators. An unreliable narrator however, is not simply a narrator who does not tell the truth- what fictional narrator ever tells the truth? Rather an unreliable narrator is one who tell lies, conceals information, misjudges with respect to the narrative audience- that is, one whose statements are untrue not by the standards of the real world or of the authorial audience but by the standards of his own narrative audience.[...] In other words, all fictional narrators are false in that they are imitations. But some are imitations who tell the truth, some of people who lie. (Rabinowitz, 133)

Two short stories which were written way back in the early Nineteenth century are analyzed to study this narrative technique. *Rashomon* and *In a bamboo grove* are short stories written by the famous Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa. He was a writer who has never been considered in the main stream of Japanese literature. He was a brilliant and erratic stylist who died, committed suicide at the age of thirty five in 1927. Ryunosuke Akutagawa is considered as the first Japanese author popularized in the west.

He wrote about 150 stories and novellas that address human dilemmas and struggles of conscience tingled with gothic fiction. He is often regarded as the father of Japanese short stories. Japan's premier literary award, the Akutagawa prize, is named after him.

The first short story, *Rashomon* describes the devastation of Kyoto during the period of civil wars and the atmosphere of complete desolation. The story begins in the rain. A servant and an old woman are the only characters in the story. The story begins with the servant who shelters himself under the gate for the weather to clear. There he finds an old woman who is stealing hair from the corpses left there. When he appeared and questioned her on her task, she pleads that she only steals to make a living by making wigs from the stolen hair. The servant, who has decided to become a thief, knocks down and takes her clothes saying that he had to do it for his own survival. The other story, *In a bamboo grove* is consisted of seven parts. They are various testimonies before the Magistrate; that of a priest, a police agent, an old woman who turned out to be the mother of the girl the bandit raped, the bandit himself, the girl herself, the murdered man-through a medium. These seven narratives are entirely different versions and are mismatching each other.

Akutagawa published his first short story *Rashomon* in the year 1915 when he was a student. The story revolves around a servant and an old woman. The setting of the story is a dilapidated Rashomon, the southern gate of the ruined city of Kyoto, where corpses are dumped. The man, who is a fired servant is contemplating whether to starve to death or to become a thief to survive. Then he encounters with a woman, who is stealing hair from the dead bodies. He is disgusted with the sight. He became furious with the woman. When he approached and questioned her, the old woman tells him that she only steals to make a living, by stealing hairs of the dead to make wigs. In addition, the woman whose body she is currently robbing cheated people in her life by selling snake meat and claiming it was fish. The old woman argued that there is nothing wrong in her act as it was for her survival. The man's response was: "You won't blame me, then, for taking your clothes. That's what I have to do to keep from starving to death" (Akutagawa, 17). Then he brutally robs the woman and disappeared. The story ends with a striking note that no one knows what happened to the lowly servant.

The story intended to expose the continuous chain of deception existed among people. They are all driven by self-interest. They do things for the sake of their survival. This narcissistic attitude is being presented through the characters of servant, old woman and the woman whose body is robbed. They all do selfish things and thus deceived others. But they all justify their acts on the ground that they want to survive. Thus the story sums up the view that the very existence of mankind itself is guided by selfish motives.

*In a bamboo grove* is another short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, published in the year 1922. *In a bamboo grove* is a disturbing tale that raises questions on the objective truth. The story presents various testimonies of the murder of a samurai, a Japanese warrior whose corpse has been found in a bamboo forest near Kyoto. Each

narrative is contradictory with the other and it asks essential questions on the credibility of the humanity and its ability to perceive and transmit objective truth.

The story opens with the testimony of a woodcutter questioned by the magistrate. He was the one who found the body. The woodcutter says that a man died of a single sword stroke to the chest, and that the bamboo leaves around the body were soaked with dark red blood. There were no weapons- only a single piece of rope, a comb and a lot of blood.

The next account was by a travelling priest. He reports that he met the man, who was accompanied by a woman on horseback, on the road, around noon the day before the murder. The man was carrying a sword, a bow and a black quiver. The next person to testify was a policeman. He has captured an infamous criminal Tajomaru. Tajomaru was injured when thrown from a horse and he was carrying a bow and a black quiver, which did not belong in his usual arsenal. This proves, he says, that Tajomaru was the perpetrator. He was not carrying the dead man's sword, however.

The next testimony is from an old woman, the mother of the missing girl in the encounter. Her daughter is a beautiful, strong-willed 19 years old named Masago, married to Kanazawa no Takehiro, a twenty-six years old kind man. She says, her daughter has never been with a man other than Takehiro. Next, the bandit Tajomaru confesses. He says that he met them on the road in the forest, and upon first seeing Masago, decided that he was going to rape her. In order to rape Masago unhindered, he separated the couple, taking Takehiro into the woods with the promise of buried treasure. He then stuffed his mouth full of leaves, tied him to a tree and fetched Masago. When Masago saw her husband, she pulled a dagger from her bosom and tried to stab Tajomaru, but he had his way with her. Originally, he had no intention of killing the man. But after the rape, she begged him to either kill her husband or kill himself- she could not live if two men knew her shame. She would leave with the last man standing. Tajomaru did not wish to kill Takehiro in a cowardly manner, so he untied him and they had a sword fight. During the duel, Masago fled. Tajomaru dispatched the man and took the man's sword, bow and quiver as well as the woman's horse. He says that he sold the sword before he was captured by the police.

The next testimony was that of Masago. According to her, after the rape, Tajomaru fled and her husband looked at her with great contempt. She was ashamed that she had been raped, and no longer wished to live, but she wanted him to die with her. He agreed, or so she believed- he couldn't actually say anything because his mouth was still stuffed full of leaves and she plunged her dagger into his chest. She then cut the rope that bound Takehiro and ran into the forest, whereupon she attempted to commit suicide numerous times. But her spirit was too strong to die. At the end of her confession, she weeps.

The final account comes from Takehiro's ghost, through a spirit medium. The ghost says that after the rape, Tajomaru persuaded Masago to leave her husband and become his own wife, which she agreed to do under one condition- he would have to kill

Takehiro. Tajomaru became enraged at the suggestion, kicked her to the ground and asked Takehiro if he should kill the dishonorable woman. Hearing this, Masago fled into the forest. Tajomaru then cut Takehiro's bonds and ran away. Takehiro grabbed Masago's fallen dagger and plunged it into his chest. Shortly before he died, he sensed someone creep up to him and steal the dagger from his chest.

The story ends with totally conflicting and contradictory account of the same event without any room for conclusion or climax. The situation is presented before the readers without any possible solution. But every account is kind of hint to the objective truth or rather questioning the objective truth through various narratives.

An overview of the story proceed from these premises: Takehiro is dead. Tajomaru raped Masago. Tajomaru stole Takehiro's bow and quiver, as well as the woman's horse. In each of the accounts, Masago wishes Takehiro dead, although the details vary. Masago and Tajomaru did not leave together. The difference between the characters' stories range from the trivial to the fundamental. What follows is a list of discrepancies between the characters' testimonies. The comb mentioned by the woodcutter is not mentioned by any of the other characters. The violent struggle that trampled the leaves, mentioned by the woodcutter, seems to occur only in Tajomaru's version of the story- the sword fight. The woodcutter also claims that the man was killed by a single sword slash across the chest, but in both Masago's and Takehiro's versions of the story, he was killed by a dagger thrust to the chest. The woodcutter claims that Takehiro was wearing a Kyoto-style hat. But Masago's mother says that he was not from Kyoto. The author wanted to emphasize this because he specifically had the police investigator ask her if Takehiro was from Kyoto. The woodcutter says that Takehiro was wearing a blue kimono and the priest says Masago was wearing a lilac kimono. In Masago's account, Takehiro is wearing a lilac kimono. Tajōmaru does not mention how Masago's dagger disappeared from the crime scene. In Tajōmaru's and Takehiro's accounts, Masago and Tajōmaru have a long conversation after the rape, after which, she is willing to leave with Tajōmaru, so long as her husband is dead. Masago's account omits this completely. Masago does not mention how Takehiro's sword disappeared from the crime scene. It seems unlikely that Masago would fail at suicide so many times, particularly considering the first method she supposedly tried: driving her dagger into her neck. Masago says that Takehiro was repulsed by her after the rape. This is not true according to the other accounts. From Takehiro's story, it is clear that he is furious at her, but he claims that this is because she asked Tajōmaru to kill him. In Tajōmaru's version, he still loves her so much that he is willing to fight to the death for her. Takehiro introduces a new and unlikely character: the person who stole the dagger from his chest, conveniently, mere seconds before his death. Masago and Takehiro claim that Tajōmaru violently kicked her after the rape. Tajōmaru says that his desire to make Masago his wife forced him to battle Takehiro instead of kicking the woman off and running away.

In short, every character says at least one thing that is refuted by another. There are contradictory versions by the bandit himself, who committed the murder, the wife, the woodcutter, who witnessed and even the murdered samurai himself told through a medium. So every narrator is an unreliable narrator. An account of one character

contradicts with the account of another. Thus there is no credibility in any of the narratives. We cannot extract the exact truth from these accounts. There are truths as well as lies. They mixed up together in a well confused manner. There must be something that tends them to conceal the truth. They don't want to admit the truth as they all have involved somehow or other way in the foul play. All accounts being contradictory justifies this selfish motive to cover up the truth. So even after the story, the truth remains as a mysterious thing. These are all mutually conflicting and contradictory stories. Each of them tells a different story so that truth cannot be filtered out. There are contradictory versions by the bandit himself, who committed the murder, the wife, the woodcutter, who witnessed and even the murdered samurai himself told through a medium.

According to the postmodern interpretations, the short story is made of a bunch of unreliable narrators. "An unreliable narrator is a narrator in literature, film or theatre whose credibility has been seriously compromised" (Frey, 93). The central event is the murder of a samurai. Three of the witnesses at the trial are supposedly the only eyewitnesses. They are: a notorious bandit, who confesses to murdering the samurai and raping his wife; the wife of the samurai; and the dead samurai himself, who testifies through a medium. Their stories all have the same basic structure: the bandit kidnapped the samurai, tied him to a tree in the woods, and raped the wife. But each story contradicts the others as to the actual murder and the motivation. And then a fourth witness- the woodcutter who had discovered the dead man in the woods- reveals that he knew more than he testified to at trial. In short, the story gives us equally plausible versions of the same grisly murder.

The wife claims that she was raped. When her husband demonstrated a sneering contempt for her helpless submission to the bandit, she killed him with a knife in her shock at his betrayal. The bandit claims the sex was consensual and the wife wanted to leave her husband for him. He killed the husband in a spectacular sword fight between highly skilled warriors over possession of the woman. The husband also claims the sex was consensual. In his story the unfaithful wife leaves with the bandit and there is no fight. Overcome with sorrow and shame, he takes his own life. A woodcutter claims to have seen the whole thing. In his story, the sex is consensual. The wife wants to start a new life with the bandit, but urges him to kill her boring husband. This disgusts even the bandit, who releases the husband; neither of them want the woman now. As she's about to be abandoned, the wife taunts the two into fighting for their own honor, if not for hers. The fight is a messy, comic brawl between ill-prepared cowards ending in the husband's death. Even the woodcutter's story is doubtful, however. When his audience asks what happened to the wife's ornate dagger, he's accused of stealing it and looks guilty.

The story does not provide any definite answer as to what actually happened. There are only a number of narratives which cannot be connected or generalized. This is the Unreliable narrator experience in postmodern terms. This particular idea is established through the technique of Rashomon effect. The world renowned Japanese director Akira Kurosawa adapted the two short stories into a well acclaimed world classic *Rashomon*(1950). The movie contributed a new technique to the literary world, called Rashomon effect. Rashomon effect is contradictory interpretations of the same event by

different people. The phrase derives from the film *Rashomon* where the accounts of the different characters in the film are entirely different. This technique encapsulates so beautifully the key problems of the postmodern condition, i.e. the multiplicity and unreliability of different narratives. It is a perfect piece to illustrate the different strands of postmodern attitudes which can easily be identified by how they would summarize the situation. So the movie or the short story can be used to interpret the postmodern conditions in terms of the technique used- Rashomon effect. According to this literary phenomenon, the narrators in such a work are meant to be known as unreliable narrators. The bandit, the woodcutter, the wife, the samurai are all unreliable narrators. The truth is hidden between their stories and is not evidently seen after all these accounts. The short story puts the readers in a state of confusion as to who is right and who is wrong. The audience would struggle to comprehend the truth inside and thus the work ends up in a disturbing mode. The story is well opened before its audience and is not finished even after it ends. The confusion became a thought provoking one and hence it served its purpose as a piece of art.

The short story anticipated the postmodern technique of unreliable narrator through Rashomon effect. Rashomon effect is a technique of giving contradictory narratives by different viewers of the same event. It is named after the film *Rashomon*, which is an adaptation of these two short stories by Akutagawa. The same technique is made use in different movies afterwards like *Gone girl*, *Courage under fire*, *Ghost Dog*, *The Woman in question* and many others. The narrative of the short story anticipated the deconstructionist view that there is no absolute truth or center. The truth is presented as a subjective ever-changing discourse that rejects the notion of objective truth. The short story written in 1922 and the film released in the year 1950 portrayed the crisis in narration which was a postmodern approach. It was later in 1961 that the academic circle discusses on the idea of unreliable narrator. Thus the plot of the text is an anticipated one whose studies and analysis are relevant even today.

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