

Postmodernism and the Irrational: A Comparative Study of Disillusionment in *Narcopolis* and *Numero Zero*

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Abstract

Since time immemorial the feeling of disillusionment has been linked to despair, denial, rejection and alienation. This theme has been explored by many writers especially in the 20th century. But, as postmodern readers, the horizons of discussions concerning disillusionment must not be limited to the thematic grounds, they must be widened and dealt with a larger scope. We must see through the shackles of rationality. The process of being disillusioned involves confusion and incoherence which exaggerates the inconsistencies and haphazardness of life. As rational beings, we the humans, try to comprehend the rationality and meaning behind our lives. This paper proposes that postmodernism gives a romantic quality in being disillusioned. The selected novels (*Narcopolis* and *Numero Zero*) will be analyzed to bring about this process portrayed by their writers (Jeet Thayil, Umberto Eco). It will discuss and establish the rationale behind the concept of irrationality.

KEYWORDS: Disillusionment, irrationality, postmodernism, narrative techniques, rationality.

The twentieth century has been a long epoch of historical change fueled by scientific and technological development and dominated by the spread of the capitalist economy and social standards extensively across the world and intensively into every nook and cranny of the soul. With these advancements the aspirations became more and more vain and plastic. During the latter part of the century this vanity of life started materializing in the spiritual and internal void in the human mind. Our kind got more and more alienated from the true derivatives of life. The existential philosophy, rising out of this degrading condition, then pointed out the lack of coherence and purpose in an ephemeral existence of humankind. It discredits the relationship between modern thinking and its dependence on the logical reasoning and emphasizes on the absurdity of modernism. Modernism came as a wave that was a long time in the making that revolutionized our pattern of thoughts and the justification of our arguments dripping with individuality and objectivity. Consequently, the literary world started showing the symptoms of the absurd existence by means of literary works such as *Waiting for Godot*, *The outsider*, *Nausea* etc. But the widespread discontentment and rebellion had to be redirected for the sake of propagating the capitalist gains therefore there was need to change the narrative and hence the focal point had to be shifted from individual and objectivity altogether. Postmodernism emerged as a counter-narrative. It focused on relativity and subjectivity of experience and interpretation thus justifying the irrational.

This paper is an attempt to accentuate and address the relationship between postmodernism and irrationality through the lenses of theme of disillusionment and the

narrative employed to tell the story. The paper analyses two fictional works – JeetThayil's *Narcopolis* and Umberto Eco's *Numero Zero* - to supplement the above mentioned premise. The novels under scrutiny are selected on the grounds of the prominent theme of disillusionment. It intends to draw a comparison between the Indian and European take on this theme given their different social and political scenarios and the interpretation of irrationality. The novels were published in the same time (2015 and 2012) and are set in the similar time period, 1970s and 1980s. Both of them deal with disillusionment which is symbolic of the chaotic times they depict.

'Modernity and rationality are interconnected in a conceptually compulsory manner in that both notions stand in an intrinsic and internal relation to one another.' (Rodolphe) On the other hand, According to Jurgen Habermas, postmodernism, as a farewell to modernity and its discourse as a whole, would of necessity represent a departure from rationality. Thus it makes sense to launch an investigation of the relation between postmodernism and rationality.

Having stated this, a discussion on different nuances of irrationality/rationality is in order. For a layman irrationality might simply mean a departure from meaning and norm. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as 'not based on, or not using clear logical thought'. But on enquiry the word does have a philosophical connotation. Descartes rests the epistemology of rationality on the metaphysical discourse. He maintains that rationality appeals to the universal laws and every universal law is inherently logical or is beyond contemplation by human mind and hence any attempt to pursue the answer will be futile. On the contrary Immanuel Kant follows an empirical approach. He defines reason or rationality as the 'faculty of principles' and so according to him rational is what fits into his Categorical Imperative. The paper relies on the empirical approach for the purpose of interpretation. There is a wide range of discourse on rationality in Indian philosophy as well such as that of Vedic literature, Buddhism and Charvak, but they are not to be dealt with in the discussion that follows

In Indian context, the postmodern phase (from 1970s-80s) is bypassed due to our colonial history. When the western world was grappled with the questions of hegemonic power in the post wars world order, India, like many other colonies, was going through the aftermath of a British colonial regime. India had to adapt to the hard earned independence and the challenges that came with it. At that time, America promised to be a country of opportunities for all and Britain seemed to have abandoned its imperialist past and ready to be a part of the new found era of globalization and market economy. For India the period was also marked by mass exodus to western horizons of the world and of defining wars with our neighbors. Ergo, the literature produced during and about that period was intrinsically postcolonial in nature replete with issues of identity crisis. Since identity is a subjective experience the postmodern aspect can be employed.

JeetThayil belongs to the new and burgeoning era of Indian literature. In his debut novel *Narcopolis* he treats his subjects as a product of a disheveled and forever changing world. In it he has vividly dealt with the theme of disillusionment and have employed certain techniques with respect to his narrative strategies and the plot structure that resemble a postmodernist piece of literature, although his take on disillusionment is quite the opposite. The novel is set in Bombay for a time period of 10 years. He has squeezed his

entire universe into an opium den in all its compelling squalor in the 1970s and '80s. It begins with the line: 'Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or 'heroin 'of this story...a great and broken city...'and it sets the tone of the narrative. An assessment of the novel by Dr. TK Pius mentions, 'Bombay is the first and last word of this first novel, an urban history written by a former drug addict through the changing composition of opiates and the changing characters of their users.'It is in this changing nature of characters where this entire discourse lies. There is a myriad of characters in the novel that possess some form of addiction in their lives. Dom, the periodic narrator is an opium addict who is back from New York and with high level of insecurity and Rashid is a criminal trying to be somebody noticeable who eventually turns out to be a greedy entrepreneur, 'with cash in his pocket and the shortest commute in the world' (Thayil135). He is product of the society that operates mercilessly and engulfs the human ambitions and churns them in a pit of never ending rat race. As the end approaches he would admit 'none of it gives me a moment of peace in my head'(ibid. 135). Years of his work in khana has had its detrimental effect. It disfigured him and he often 'looked away from his degraded image' (ibid. 146) in the mirror.Rashid's disappointment in life stems from his barren life.

Dimple is the eunuch whose addiction is not solely to the drug of the den but also 'to the endless search for knowledge and beauty'. Dimple had a painful life as a transgender. She was abused in her very early childhood. She narrates how she had to go through the process of gelding and docking when she was just a child. And said when they poured hot oil on my wound. That was when I felt the pain ...' (ibid. 66- 67) Forgetfulness was a gift, a talent to be nurtured'. (ibid. 57) She used the drug to numb the pain of being abused and tortured. She resorted to the pallet that Mr. Lee gave her. Slowly the pain was replaced by a sense that 'something that enveloping that told her she was loved, no, beloved: she was beloved and not alone'. (ibid. 60) Her considerate and gentle nature was the only means that she believed could alleviate her from her pathetic and agonizing existence. But, Dom, the not so reliable narrator gets her into rehabilitation and she, like all other characters, finds her escape from the ordeal that had been her life and comes through.

Similarly other characters such as Rumi a husband addicted to violence. Bengali and Mr. Lee the drug dealer from China. All these personalities are in search of the balance and reason behind their deplorable existence. Thayil bound these characters until the very end in pursuit of rationality and meaning in their lives. Being irrational in this endeavor gave them an escape in their lives but Thayil never settled for this pathway as a solution of the afflictions of his characters. He strives to give them a desired and meaningful end with no loose edges and no room for multiple interpretations. His disillusionment never finds acceptance but it does find the clichéd responses by the individuals. Thus finally arriving to a concrete solution. Therefore, the postmodernist outlook has to be stripped down of its relation to irrationality to understand and uncover the alienation of these characters.

But Umberto Eco, as a stark contrast to Jeet Thayil, brings about this dichotomy with ease. Like in *Narcopolis* Eco presents a set of characters who are equally disillusioned but not in a Kafkaesque manner. Colonna is the protagonist who is in his late 50s and is leading a life far from his expectations that he had for himself, disillusioned, unaccomplished and uneventful. He is a hack journalist- the job itself represents a façade, it maybe a metaphor for the illusion of lies, power and sense of importance that the writer wants to accentuate

by means of the novel. Eco glorifies and romanticizes this disillusionment by placing the Numero zero parallel to Numero Unos. Colonna is hired by Simei, to work on a newspaper called *Domani (Tomorrow)* whose publication will remain under the wraps. Commendator Vimercate is the financier who is a corporate giant. The sole purpose of the newspaper is to intimidate the people high up in the hierarchy and to find a way in the 'inner sanctum of finance, banking' (Eco, p.16). They claim to publish "zero issues" that will be seen by powerful personalities. These people will find themselves in desperate conditions and will be ready to do anything to keep the truth from coming out.

Colonna has a crew to work on the paper Braggadocio used to work for a scandal magazine and he likes to view everything with a bit of conspiracy mixed in it; Cambria earned his living as a hack reporter, Lucidi is a person whose supposedly works for a secret service, Palatino is yet another loser and has spent his career working on puzzle and crossword magazines, Constanza was a sub-editor for various newspapers and finally Maia Fresia worked on a celebrity romance magazine.

Right from the beginning of the narration Colonna is in search for a rational reason behind his unexplained fears just like Sartre's alienated Antonio in *Nausea*.

This disillusionment is not only in Colonna and other characters rather it is also prominent in the society precipitated by a media circle that is corrupt to its core. The passive acceptance of the horrid attacks on people and journalism is just a peep into a vast valley of lies and power struggle.

His colleagues are equally disturbed and alienated from themselves and the society. But, they are miserable people with a zest for life. Unlike Thayer's microcosm, Eco does not ponder upon the solution of their deviated souls. Rather he appreciates this 'postmodern condition' and the abstraction and irrationality behind it. It is treated as the unavoidable counter idea of rationality.

Eco brings together people from different backgrounds with their due baggage and yet manages to make life bearable. Mumbling characters who find love and meaning under the veil of a newspaper that never existed and symbolizes the celebration of a level of abstraction that is otherwise frowned upon. The characters of both the books perceive their alienation very differently and therefore they find their solutions in completely different actions.

The postmodern ways of the world saw the life in the light as, TS Eliot puts it, 'what is actual is actual only for one time/And only for one place' (*Ash Wednesday*). It is the beauty of postmodernism that it celebrates irrationality and opened up to the philosophy of subjectivity in dealing with disillusionment while one writer undermines it the other romanticizes it up to a practical and yet deeply philosophical level.

Similarly, this discourse can be carried forward by a close study of the narrative techniques used in the novels. Thayer presents the reader in an interesting authorial device, not only with a single omniscient narrator but also in the sentence structure. Thayer explains in an interview to the Reuters that "The opening sentence, the prologue, I wrote that about halfway through the writing of the book, and when I wrote that sentence, I realized this is the way the book should be. And I rewrote the book, changing the

language of it with long sentences ... rather than short sentences because I realized the only way to write about opium and darkness was to write long, open-ended sentences where the writer who is writing it has no idea where the sentence is going to go. So you follow it and there is a sense of discovery - for the reader as well. One couldn't write a book about opium, which is a very slow, long process, with short quick Hemingway, journalistic, telegraphic sentences”(Reuters). Thus he set an outline for a reader to approach his narration.

Thayil places a set of narrators each of whom gets to tell their story. Therefore, to say the least, the story telling throughout the novel is transient from one narrator to other in manner so seamless that at times it is hard to detect where the narrator are switched. Dom, the protagonist is an omniscient narrator whose voice seem to come and go sporadically throughout the story. The technique used predominantly is the first person narration. Multiple narrators, the fluid change of voice, the sentence structure and biographic monologues create a reading experience that exuberates the disorientation that the book is replete with. The plot follows a non-linear timeline which moves in leaps and then stumbles, this seems intentional by the writer to give the reader a simulated experience of being in an opium drug haze, where time, and even facts, are somewhat fluid and uncertain. This emotional space is induced from the beginning of the book as the opening sentence runs for seven pages.

The not very reputable and uninviting characters pose a threat to the credibility of the accounts that they narrate because they are under the influence of drugs. Whether the stories are a drug-induced visions or a confused memory or a fantastical belief is always questionable although their stories are consistent within themselves. Their lifestyles, habits, addictions and desperations render their unreliable narrations. On the other hand, Dr. T K Pius in his article observes that ‘the narrators often demonstrate high degree of self-awareness, awareness of the world, and often present what appear to be bleak, uncompromising versions of realities, which come across as convincing and reliable because there is no attempt to euphemize whether this is basis enough on which to trust such narrators to lead the reader through the landscape of menace and drug abuse, disregard for and devaluation of human rights, dignities, and life, is a question each reader needs to decide individually. However reliable, or otherwise, collectively, these narrators patch together a riveting portrait of the seedier side of Bombay’.

Postmodern aspect of the alienation that the characters of *Narcopolis* experience finds its manifestation in the search for identity. Dom Ullis along with all other narrators have drug addictions to numb the realization of their miniature status in their microcosm. Dom wants to disassociate himself from magnanimity of life by indulging, against his better judgment, into a few joints. He wants to find himself but addiction gets in the way. Dimple, unlike other transgender characters across Indian literature is not engaging in search for identity as a human being rather, she is searching for her true self, she wants to realize her potential, she wants to gain knowledge about the world. She speaks in a philosopher like manner, but what stops her is her addiction, the escape route that she used to placate her feelings in childhood. There is a denouement to all the crisis of identity of all other characters as well. Therefore it can be derived that Thayil has explored the not-so-linear format for presenting the postmodern and for the purpose of

interpretation of the text it can be viewed as an extension of representation of the irrational.

A postmodern narrative is sometimes characterized by a disarray of genres and narrative. Scattered throughout narrative are references to other texts and other stories, which make the novel multi-layered. Books appear within dreams.

In a nutshell, *Narcopolis* has followed the postmodern technique with utmost precision that includes intertextuality and multi layered plot and can be read as a spectrum of narratives depicting the pragmatism of a divested and alienated mind with an attempt for a continuous movement towards abstraction.

Umberto Eco takes the same stance and takes it a step further. In *Numero Zero* Eco has used the conspiracy theories surrounding the life and death of Mussolini to create a kaleidoscope of complexities. The book is essentially a diary account mixed with an element of historical metafiction which inevitably hints at the possibility of different interpretation of the facts that are well established.

A lot of diversion of ideas and gibberish is accompanied with this historical account which ultimately suggests the absurdity of synergy in arguments in a postmodern text. For Lyotard, one ought to conceive of the postmodern as constituted primarily by a crisis of narratives. The crisis of narrative manifests itself in the grand narratives which are characteristic of postmodern narration. As a result, 'this postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives, and the subsequent re-casting of the function of legitimation, leads to an explosion of mini narratives or language games which profoundly affect the status of knowledge and the idea of reason.' (Rodolphe p. 531) This is best exemplified by Umberto Eco through his use of conspiracy theories. These metanarrative stories are symbolic of the glorification of irrational and a tendency to go further away from realities towards abstract notions.

Hence the language itself is disillusioned from its uncertain said rules. But, its this very uncertainty that brings in the romantic aspect of the 'postmodern condition'.

Conclusion:

Umberto Eco who has been hailed as a postmodern writer throws light on this possibility of glorifying the vague, of looking at it without limiting its scope as opposed to Jeethayil who approaches the idea with much less enthusiasm. Both the writers employ postmodern narrative strategies but while one explores the idea of postmodern skepticism the other treads to ponder on the self-reflexivity of it.

Rationality and irrationality are the two opposite binaries. As Lyotard said postmodern knowledge 'refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable' (Lyotard, XXV). The irrational is the incommensurable that the world finds difficult to mull upon. But postmodernity allows one to gauge the difference and tap into the potential that the irrational brings with itself as it is not an utter farewell to reason but, as Rodolphe Gasché observes, 'a shift towards the reason of the plural, the indeterminate, the random and the irregular.'

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