From a Cacophony of Existence to the Rhythm of Riotousness: Reading Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as a Pattern of Patternlessness

Abhilash Dey

Abstract

Laurence Sterne so resorts to a device of patterning his plot in his narrative The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.(it is postmodern and is written at a time when there was no modernism around) that it offers stories within a story, enhancing the meaning and movement of the main stream of narration. This article probes Sterne's technique through the lens of what is known as 'Chinese Box Technique'. This technique serves as the precursor of the machine that Andre Gide adopts in his novel Les Fauz-Monnayeurs. Tristram, it goes without saying, is a fictionalized character, the central piece of the population in the book, and he is so presented that he is a concrete living breathing human being—a historian rather—chronicling his life story relying exclusively on his memory. One may fittingly call the anti-novel a 'memory novel', Tristram constantly unrolling the thread of his recollection. The treatise examines Tristram Shandy with respect to both Fabulation and Metafiction by Robert Scholes and Myth and Sissyphusby Camus. Sterne makes Tristram Shandy a fiction which turns its back on the tradition represented by Fielding and gives us an attitude to life, which is a foil to the dictum of coherence and accepted fidelity of the age. The paper shows Laurence Sterne as an eighteenth century Joyce. Both regale stories, defying a linear pattern; both leave drifts and gulfs in their fragmented narrative. Sterne, insofar as his narrative art is concerned foreshadows Joyce and asserts himself as a notable pioneer of modern fictional art. For Sterne, human life is virtually a 'zoo story', a fiction projecting the cacophony of existence, the rhythm of riotousness.

Keywords: plot, Sterne, Tristram Shandy, Chinese Box Technique, metafiction, fabulation, absurdity

The novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.*starts in the calendar year of 1718, and it ends in 1713. This is indicative of the backward movement of the narrative, though as the story progresses with a train of flashbacks and flashforwards it is also judiciously executed, and that accounts for the projection of events which forming the middle of the narrative, which occurs in 1756. The fact is that while dealing with time, Sterne makes use of two levels of time: clock time and psychological time. This technique of intermingling the two levels of time one may discern in Woolf, who pretty frequently moves from psychological time to physical time, and years earlier the mode of two-level criss-cross of time was evident in Sterne's novel.

It is often alleged, Sterne makes his narratives terribly obscure by multiple intersections of digressive episodes. There is no denying that if Sterne starts a digressive episode, in a short compass, there follows another digression which melts into still another digression. But the digressions are so manipulated that they seldom hinder the main line of progression. However cloudy the pattern of digression, on no occasion the movement of the plot is derailed. What is more, Sterne is interested in the story of the mind rather than the tale of the matter. Every digression carries a subtle psychological shade, and that results in the richness of Sterne's expression.

Digression is nothing new in literature. Homer frequently strays away from his pivotal narrative and unrolls episodes apparently unrelated to the story proper. But his digressive mode does not hinder his process of progression. Not are the digressive pieces productive of the readers' boredom. On the contrary, the digressions add to diversion and make the narrative profusely interesting. In fact, every successful epic provides a mighty texture accommodating a host of digressions, and their 'functional' relevance cannot be doubted. But digressions are to be handled with care and caution. After all, they have a tendency to go reckless, caring little for coming back to their point of departure. It is interesting to note that Sterne, a prodigy of digressive composition, categorically points out that there are two kinds of digression—good and bad.

The former, says he, enriches the central story and helps smooth progression, while the latter 'exists in isolation', with little bearing on what the main composition is about. Sterne so resorts to a device of patterning his plot that it offers stories within a story, enhancing the meaning and movement of the main stream of narration. Sterne's technique follows what is known as 'Chinese Box Technique', suggesting a process of objects emerging incessantly from a magic box. Sterne, like an illusionist, exhibits a Box, his novel, which gives rise to a story which lets loose a flow of numerous embedded stories following one another. This technique serves as the precursor of the technique that Andre Gide adopts in his novel *Les Fauz-Monnayeurs*, which is about a novelist who writes about another novelist, who again is engaged in writing a novel about a novelist. The process goes on, and this is how the flow of narrative progression proceeds like a chain reaction.

The classic example of Sterne's art of digression lies in the very title of his novel, the life and opinions of a man named Tristram Shandy. But what one finds in the narrative is the life of Tristram in terms of the life of his father, Mr Shandy and that of his uncle Toby. Various eccentricities of Mr Shandy are brought into the focal plane through series of episodes, and uncle Toby is said to have his Hobby-Horse which he rides pretty often and trots from one episode to another like a feverish fit. Melvyn New in his essay, "Job's Wife and Sterne's other Women" waxes eloquent about the hobby-horsical attitude of Sterne's characters:

> Sterne was, of course, an astute observer of 'obstinacie in opinion', which he often labels 'hobby-horsical' behavior; he was also, I would like to suggest, an ardent explorer of alternatives to it, ever resistant to the temptations of absolutism, ever aware as well of the human proclivity toboth dominate and succumb. Moreover, as numerous readers have noted, Sterne's exploration most often followed the byways of human sexuality, particularly, as is readily apparent in *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, within the institutions of marriage and courtship. In reversingthe common sequence of the two (that is, courtship followed by marriage), I follow the clue of Sterne's own fictions, which begin in the Shandys' marital bed but end, despite his clerical robes, his enervated condition, and, I suspect, even his own deepest inclinations, with the grotesque*Journal to Eliza* and, at the very last, his hand stretched across the space between two beds, reaching for the end that remains out of sight. (Walsh 70)

Moreover, the book devotes itself to the 'opinions' less of Tristram than of his father, Walter, his uncle, and their close associates. At the first blush, the title appears to be a misnomer, but on a deeper scrutiny it comes out that what others in the book speak airing their 'opinions' virtually clarify the life and times of Tristram in a roundabout way.

Consider, for instance, the episode of Toby having his affair of love with the Widow. When Widow Wadman intending to come close to uncle Toby asks him to show the exact spot where he sustained his wound. But when Widow Wadman wanted to feel the exact position of his wound, Toby, thinking that Wadman was curious about knowing the exact place where he had sustained the battle scar, brought a map and showed her the location, the spot at Namur where he had received the injury. But when he learned that the woman did not want to touch the surface of the map but the surface of his limb, Toby was furious, heartbroken and the romance vanished before long. Moreover, when uncle Toby realises the ulterior motive of Widow Wadman he grows acid and rejects her proposal for marriage summarily. This digressive episode throws light on Tristram's fine sense of humour and we get an important aspect of his mind, Sterne's outlook, Sterne's taste and, of course, his opinions.

There is another significant feature of Sterne's handling of digressions. Whenever he refers to a story, he is particular about noting the exact time and the date of its occurrence. While referring to his own conception, the narrator looks back and narrates what he has collected from a diary of Walter's—the exact night of his conception. The first Monday of March, 1718. It is queer for a son to recall the exact time of his conception. The reference to the exact night makes this episode, otherwise funny and somewhat irrelevant, so meaningful and reasonable. The time consciousness of Tristram acquires an edge of humour. When it is informed that at the time of his being engaged in having coitus with his wife, Mrs Shandy

interrupted Walter Shandy by asking whether he had properly winded his 'clock'! To quote Sterne in this context: "Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?" (Sterne 2). The word, 'clock', when mentioned by Mrs Shandy, provides a wonderful and fantastic twist to the whole affair of digression, and makes it an instance of flippant comedy thwarting the high seriousness of the novels of the day.

The theory of humours fell short when it came to explaining the form of humorous writing that gradually emerged in the first half of the eighteenth century. Humour was no longer to be equated with the four constitutive elements of the human body, but had become a form of comedy independent of, though related to, other branches such as wit, satire, and irony. Laurence Sterne's humour as recorded in *Tristram Shandy* has been the butt of unfavourable criticism. Dr Johnson thinks that Sterne's humour is 'immoral' and wrote, "Nothing odd will do long. Tristram Shandy did not last" (qtd. in Anderson 484) while Goldsmith discovers in it something of a vulgar gusto (480-481). Walter Scott has equally no good opinion about Sterne's humour, which according to him, is indiscreet (489). However, Sterne sees life—stressing the funny aspect of it—and the fun and frivolity that make the soul of his humour may have something bawdy about it. But the 'innocence' that his humour radiates cannot be overlooked. Rather, his humourous vein, as projected in his novel, has somewhat child-like queerness about it.

It is customary to call Sterne's humour 'Rabelaisian'. The French writer, Rabelais', treatment of humour bordered on bawdy and adultery. His humour took the label Rabelaisian but in the right sense of the term, Sterne's humour is not exactly Rabelaisian, for he—thanks to his innate simplicity—does not ever touch on the crudity of vulgar exposition. Rather, the vulgar, when executed by Sterne, acquires a new orientation. And it appeals more to the cortex than to the fibre of senses. To be precise, bawdy and inane or otherwise, Sterne's humour caries the hallmark of innocent frivolity. Tristram says that his life has something topsy-turvial about it because at the time of his conception, his mother posed an interruption asking Walter Shandy (still engaged in coitus) whether he had remember to wind the clock! A man recalling the time of his being conceived may have apparently a shade of vulgarity, but when it is said that the interruption caused by his mother was just about her eagerness for safeguarding the 'health of a clock', adultery gives way to holiday fun.

Next, Tristram says that an accident occurred before he was born. Dr Slop, a quack, supervised the delivery of the baby Tristram, and mistaking the baby's hand for his nose, Slop used his forceps and flattened the baby's nose. This is, says the narrator/author, the reason for his nose being so 'notably' flat! Sterne's way is to extract humour from including himself in the pivot. For instance, he gives an account of his baptism. Walter Shandy chose a name for the baby boy to be baptised, Trismegistus, the name of a renowned ancient philosopher. But the maid, Susannah, while communicating the name to the parson, Yorick, forgot the exact name. This is how Yorick somehow deduced the name, Tristram, and the

titular narrator was unfortunately baptised as Tristram and not Trismegistus. The name, Tristram, was a source of delight to Yorick but the mistake made by Susannah and the delight expressed by Yorick only deprived Tristram of enjoying the glory of an ancient seer.

Uncle Toby in the book is an unforgettable character, and he may, by virtue of his military robustness, easily outshines his namesake in *Twelfth Night*. The man had occasion to be a soldier, but sustaining a wound he retired from the battlefront and started living in the countryside, built according to the 'wise' counsel of his servant Corporal Trim—a large and complicated series of model fortifications and military emplacements. Even today, in his advanced age, Toby practised military exploits and remains absorbed in mock-battles. The man was once involved in a romantic affair with a widow, casting her charm and extracting from Toby a proposal for marriage. The affair did not come full circle for either, and trails a sting of rib-tickling adulterated laughter. Humorous writers, therefore, as Sterne in particular, delight to end in nothing, or a direct contradiction. "That there is something in this is evident; for you cannot conceive a humourous man who does not give some disproportionate generality, universality, to his hobbyhorse," says Coleridge, "as Mr Shandy; or at least (there is) an absence of any interest but what arises from the humour itself, as in uncle Toby" (Anderson 485).

There are numerous episodes loaded with laughter. Tristram's father has his 'humour' of discoursing. Whenever he gets a topic—trivial or serious—he starts probing the heart of it until he unearths a thesis out of it. For example, as Walter Shandy learns his wife, while giving the birth of a baby boy, prefers the supervision of a midwife to that of a male doctor, he is engaged in investigating the essential nature of women, and his discussion virtually takes the reader to a multi-faceted dissertation on feminine psychology and the trends and tendencies of all women under the sun. Such is the man whose digressive musings, so innocent, provide bouts of laughter and over-brim the reader with a kind of crystal delight.

As the various hobby-horses unerringly lead their riders into trouble, one would have expected the self to become aware of its entrapment in its own phantasm, and to rescue itself from ludicrousness by breaking the self-imposed spell. Why does this not happen? The protagonists certainly do not see themselves as ridiculous. According to Jean Paul: "[no] man's actions can appear ridiculous to himself, except an hour later, when he has already become a second self and can attribute the insights of the second self to the first. A man can either respect or scorn himself in the midst of an act ... but he cannot laugh at himself" (qtd. in Iser 110)."But Toby and Walter's second self of the second hour never gets a chance to revise the views of the first self, because they never cease to ride their hobby-horses," writes Wolfgang Iser (Iser 110).

Manifestly, Sterne greets his readers with a bouquet of funny episodes and laughter-provoking situations and at times his humour gets merged with satire. He intellectually attacks the social customs and creeds, and in a light vein he exposes the folly of the people

who pass for men of letters, men of learning and unassailable experience. For instance, while Tristram says that his life turns unsuccessful because the time of his being conceived was not adequately smooth, he, with his tongue on the cheek, points to the pseudo-astrologers who calculate man's destiny by examining the situation at the time of the baby's conception and its birth. The bogus mode of calculation comes in Sterne's criticism, which articulates itself under the guise of humour.

Tristram is a fictionalized character, the central piece of the population in the book, and he is so presented that he is a concrete living breathing human being—a historian rather—chronicling his life story relying exclusively on his memory. One may fittingly call the anti-novel a 'memory novel', Tristram constantly unrolling the thread of his recollection. Sterne stands far behind, and it is Tristram who comes to the fore and recalls the past, and as he resorts to recapitulation, from time to time, he jumps forward and casts glimpses of what still lie on the anvil.

Tristram, speaking about himself, thinks of the day when he was 'conceived', and his 'genesis', which recorded, takes him to his mother who, says he, had a special fondness for London, and her fraudulent journey to London he recalls deprived her of the delivery of the baby (none other than Tristram himself) under the supervision of an expert physician, rather a midwife came to smoothen Tristram's descent on earth and a quack was also there who mistook the nose of the baby half emerged for his hand. All these digressions make an organic structure introducing a number of character carrying glimpses of Tristram's psychological response.

In his famous book, *Myth and Sissyphus*, published first in 1942,Camus makes this significant comment: in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusion and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. He further adds: the divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting truly constitutes the feeling of absurd. It is this 'feeling of absurd' that has followed this illusionment caused by World War II and that eventually gives birth to the acute realization of nothingness which finds expression, among others, in *Waiting for Godot*, which brings into focus Beckett's reaction to the absurdity in which the modern people sink steadily. In *Fabulation and Metafiction*,Robert Scholes examines the term, metafiction, and unearths its close kinship with absurd literature, pointing out that when man finds his surroundings irrelevant and inexplicable, he behaves in a way which is 'normally absurd'.What is more, according to Scholes what metafiction demonstrates virtually derives its sustenance from what is known as Magic Realism—which owes its origin to a school of painters practising an ever-shifting pattern, interweaving ordinary events with fantastic dreamlike elements. The free-wheeling narrative device, as used by the writers of magic realism, is known as 'fabulation', and it goes without saying that fabulation serves as the soul of what we call metafiction. In fact, metafiction is a sort of absurd novel (according to the sense, as conveyed by Camus) with a marked leaning towards 'fabulation'.

To be precise, metafiction makes a departure from the conventional novel which is based on a well-organised story comprising of a set of characters who speak conventionally and react to their situations in a conventional way. A novel which serves as a metafiction does not tread a steady line of sequence, and the pattern it offers is manifestly a pattern of patternlessness. The serious is juxtaposed with the trivial, while the tragic is communicated with a sweep of laughter. A kind of absurdity permeates the texture, and this is how the effect of Fabulation is produced.

Sterne is an author who is far ahead of his day. He is a postmodern writer born in the eighteenth century which is noted for the faithful loyalty to pseudo-classical literature. Sterne makes *Tristram Shandy* a fiction which turns its back on the tradition represented by Fielding and gives us an attitude to life, which is a foil to the dictum of coherence and accepted fidelity of the age. *Tristram Shandy* is a metafiction chiefly because it reflects a sort of Magic Realism, tending to turn the clock back. In the first place, though the novel is named after Tristram, what we find in the book is not exactly an account of Tristram but a detailed (and sporadic) chronicle of Tristram's father, mother, uncle, a village priest, a maid-servant, a midwife and others. Tristram makes himself visible through the images of his people who give way to diverse whims and hobbies.

In the second place, the novel brings in serious events which breathe the air of fun and frivolity. For example, when there is an event of death, Corporal Trim, the servant of uncle Toby, dwells in a 'philosophy' of death and to give a concrete demonstration of death he takes up a hat and drops it stressing the transitoriness of life. Uncle Toby is out and out serious, and his seriousness carries an undercurrent of unconscious jest. On one occasion, he joined war and following a severe wound in his groin at the fateful seize of Namur retired from the battlefronts. Now, with his would somewhat healed, he carries the mark of the wound on his mind, and in his garden he has a pocket-battlefield where he often mock-practises his military feats. This is his hobbyhorse which he rides and enjoys the heat of war. One may also refer to the misfortune at the time of Tristram's birth. A local physician, a quack, named Dr Slop, before attending Mrs Shandy takes a bottle of liquor, wine, and converses in a leisurely fashion with Mr Shandy and uncle Toby; at last, when he goes to examine and supervise the case, he mistakes the head of the baby for its hip. As he, in his mighty way, uses the large pair of forceps, the "misfortune" of the baby occurs, the event leaving a permanent stamp on the nose of Tristram! Besides, the events, seriously funny, are so presented that they defy the code of sequence and create 'methodical irregularity'.

The apparently non-existent exposition of events and situation is so manipulated that it poses no obstacle to the readers' understanding; though the total impression that the book produces is one of 'nothingness' in a flood of objects. The realism reflected in the novel has something like a meaningful fantasy. The author is out to communicate his message, and the message concerns itself with the humane run of lives and times which is, in the final analysis,

much ado about nothing.Truth to tell, it is the central nothingness of life that Sterne intends to highlight in his work, which may fittingly be captioned "An Account of Irremediable Exile". In other words, for Sterne, human life is virtually a "zoo story", a fiction projecting the cacophony of existence, the rhythm of riotousness.

Importantly, while Sterne shows his time-awareness, the arrangement of chapters and episodes is scarcely chronological. Rather, the past and the present 'disregard' their order of occurrence. The years like 1699 (Aunt Dinah's lapse with the coachman), 1706 (the demise of Le Fever), 1712 (marriage of Obadiah), 1713 (the birth of Obadiah's firstborn), 1749 (the death of Yorick) are so introduced that they tend to overlap, ignoring chronological sequence. Nevertheless, the weaving of the episodes is so executed that the disarray in time-sequence poses no inhibition to following the time of progression and understanding the trend of the train of motif. An even more difficult aspect of Sterne's wit is what D.W. Jefferson labels 'learned wit,' the esoteric, encyclopedic graffiti with which Sterne loves to litter his pages (Anderson 502).

In his treatise "Did Sterne Complete *Tristram Shandy*?",Wayne C. Booth mentions that, by analogy with French practice, a "Cock-and-Bull" story was a term for an obscene story, and then focuses on the ripples of this one phrase in the context of *Tristram Shandy*. To echo René Bosch from his seminal work,*Labyrinth of Digressions:*

> With cock, Yorick alludes to the ailments of Tristram and Toby, and through Walter's impotent bull to the problematic engendering of Tristram, as well as to the deception of the readers by Sterne's title (by way of "to bull", that is, to bully). The story thus bites its own tail: the anecdote of the bull brings us back thematically to the conception of our hero in the early pages which, chronologically, follows the adventure with the bull. Since Booth assumes that *Tristram Shandy* is a pre-designed whole, complete in itself, he regards the suggestion ofbullying as a final wink at the reader, who knows now that he will never hear anything about the promised life of the narrator. (124)

In fact, Sterne handles the mass of digressions in a prudent way, and the result is that the reader, while flipping about the pages, immensely enjoys the feast of fun without being confused at any point.One may safely call Laurence Sterne an eighteenth century Joyce. Both regale stories, defying a linear pattern; both leave drifts and gulfs in their fragmented narratives; both bring in episodes which have no apparent bearing on the main drift of progression. In fact, Sterne, insofar as his narrative art is concerned foreshadows Joyce and asserts himself as a notable pioneer of modern fictional art. *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne's major work, does full justice to serving as a faithful document of Sterne's uniqueness as a storyteller, an artist who, like a Chinese Box extracts a story from another story which again gives rise to another story which leads to another story, which finds another story in its

womb. This is how Sterne piles story upon stories and makes a new mode of unfolding the "heart" of his fiction.

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