

An Effective Use of Non-linear Narrative Techniques in the Selected Contemporary War Novels

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Abstract

War novels display vividly the battle field of the war and the impacts of war on the civilians. War novels are also known as historical fictions as they deal with the wars fought in particular period of time in history. They are different from historical books as they not only document the events but add a fictional plot to make it a historical novel. Two narrative techniques are widely used by the novelists in general. They are linear and non-linear narratives. They are also known as conventional or unconventional narratives. The linear narrative follows the events chronologically whereas the non-linear narratives start from the middle of the story and go back and forth using different mechanics of flashbacks and flash-forwards. The contemporary novelists use non-linear narratives to heighten the emotion and infuse curiosity in the readers. This article foregrounds the impact of non-linear narrative techniques in the postmodern and contemporary war novels. The study includes the following novel; All Quiet on the Western Front, Slaughterhouses-Five, The Sorrow of War, Going After Cacciato, The Things I Carried, The Kite Runner, The Watch, S.: A Novel about the Balkans and The Tiller of Waters. The non-linear narrative techniques are the best suitable for the untellable stories of mental and the physical agony and anguish suffered by the civilians and soldiers during the war and the lasting impacts it had infused in their psyche.

Key Words: war, narrative techniques, postmodern etc.

Introduction

War novels display vividly the battle field of the wars fought and their impacts on the civilians. This can be traced back to the epic poems *Beowulf*, *The Iliad*, *Aeneid* and other novel from the past to the present. The gory nature of the war is portrayed and the victors are deified. The medieval period playwrights like Marlow and Shakespeare have depicted the

features of war in their works. Most of the war novels have been written in the postmodern and the contemporary periods. They are written so as to expose the evil impacts of the two World Wars, Cold Wars, Civil Wars and other religious and ethnic riots. The narrative style of the most of the novels has been unconventional and non-linear.

Non-linear Narrative Techniques

A non-linear narrative starts at the middle of the story or the height of the conflict and then goes back to the beginning and then ends abruptly. In this regard the writers use flash backs and flash forwards to keep the readers guessing what is coming next. There are varieties of non-linear narrative techniques used by the contemporary writers. Some of the narratives are stream of consciousness, flashbacks, flash forwards, focalization of characters, first person to multiple personal narratives, interior monologues, memoir etc.

The novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, written about the World War I, by using the first person narration Eric Maria does justice to the readers making the maximum effect of the war on the soldiers fighting in the war zones.

Fourteen days ago we had to go up and relieve the front line. It was fairly quiet on our sector, so the quartermaster who remained in the rear had requisitioned the usual quantity of rations and provided for the full company of one hundred and fifty men. But on the last day an astonishing number of English heavies opened up on us with high explosive, drumming ceaselessly on our position, so that we suffered severely and came back only eight. (Maria Erich 2).

. This novel mirrors the effect of war essentially about the implacable condition of trench war and how it was fought. The smell of the death, stabbing scenes, chopping limbs and gushing blood are the horror the soldiers have to deal with daily in the war front. Remarque also portrays the futility of war as a crippling overload of panic and despair. Every battle scene features brutality of violence. The cheapness of life is well narrated through the competition and anxiety by the comrades to get the boot of the dead soldier.

Kurt Vonnegut in the novel *Slaughterhouses-Five* further moves away from the conventional narrative technique. He begins the novel in linear style but cannot prolong as the war is only of massacre and destruction. Hence it doesn't deserve any logical narration. So he introduces series of flashbacks and forwards to bring relief to the readers from the excessive pathos portrayed. The characters try to escape from the routine war atmosphere. "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955. He has gone back

through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times”(Vonnegut 11).

The unhinged time- shifting mechanism used for the main character Billy Pilgrim expresses the unfathomable aggression and the mass destruction he witnessed in the war. The novel is so short and jangled as there is nothing so intelligent to say about the war. The main protagonist is shown in an unconventional manner as a funny looking, weak youth. The repeated use of the phrase “So it goes” after each death diminishes the gravity of death. The use of Tralfamadorians in the plot highlights the impact of fantasy in the fiction. The author has also introduced the technique of stream of consciousness as his thought process goes back and forth from the earth to the celestial realm abruptly.

The novel *The Sorrow of War* brings back the bitter and the destructive memory of Vietnam civil War in which America had its role. The author BaoNinh has used the non-linear narrative genre very effectively. In this novel the writer has used the technique of stream of consciousness throughout the novel. Telling an untellable story of every individual got in the web of war atmosphere is heart wrenching. It is a story of a soldier gathering bones of the dead bodies belonging to his comrades after the battle to give them good burial. He dreams of going back to his village as his thoughts lingering over her lover and ponders on how the war has changed her to become a whore and then again goes double backwards to the battle field remembering deadly confrontation with the enemy soldiers and how the dead were humiliated without any proper burials. It chronicles the loss of innocence, love and anguish at the memory of war. The narrative technique used in this novel helps the writers to negotiate history through memory. It offers a process of engaging with the identity of the writer, reader and the characters. BaoNinh has created a connection between the past, present and the future by embedding the individual experience into a collective identity. He also gives importance to the contextualizing the war into artistic relationship. He creates a enriching dialogue with the present through the contemporary reader; and with the past through the writer who lived in it; and providing an important site of memory to renegotiate with the meaning of the past in order to imagine a future (Cole & Berry 2011).

Going AfterCacciato and *The Things I Carried* are best sellers of the author Tim O’ Brien. *Going AfterCacciato* blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, reality and dream. The novel is narrated in a surreal reflection on the reality of war and the dream of leaving it. In photographic detail the author Berlin recounts the death of the members of his squad in a state of stream consciousness (Koquin 2011). Tim O’ Brien develops characters by pairing them with other characters. The character of Doc Peret is being contrasted with Paul, the

dreamer. Tim O' Brien has uses storytelling to foreground the narrative technique again and again. The stories can make the past become part of the present.

In the novel *The Kite Runner* the author Khaled Hosseini has applied flashback narrative throughout the plot of the novel. The story starts with the protagonist recalling an event that took place twenty-six years before. Then the story skips to winter when the kite fighting tournament occurs. Then suddenly the story jumps back to March 1981 when Amir and his father escaping from Kabul to Pakistan. The novel begins with him living in San Francisco and then immediately jumps back to his childhood in Kabul. Shortly after that jumps back to Baba's and Ali's childhood and towards the end, Rahim Khan shares his own story of going back in time and narrating about how Hassan life has been ended. The events in the novel and the characters' state of mind also reflect the transition of Afghanistan from calm state of Kabul during the monarchy, the founding of republic, followed by the Soviet invasion and the infighting between the rival Afghan groups ruin the country. This kind of narration provides critical information about the character's history and reinforces the thematic ideas that the past is necessary to understand the present.

The novel *The Watch* written by Joydeep Bhattacharya follows multiple narratives to make the characters express different perspectives of war experience. This form of narrative accommodates flashbacks and memories of life in the past. The characters like Antigone, Lieutenant, The captain, Surgeon make the narrative more powerful with the vivid narration of one's own point of view about the Afghanistan conflict. Multiple narrations followed in the novel emphasize the effects of Afghanistan war from different perspectives thought by different characters. The author writes each chapter of the novel from the point view of different characters. "It's up to me now. I'm terrified: my hands are shaking, my mouth is parched. I wait until their shadows enter the circle of blood. Then I reach under the blanket covering the lamb with my knife and cut the plaited wire." (Roy Bhattacharya 34)

It also brings home the perspective of the Americans who find themselves in a surreal world of extreme climate and cultural difference. The Lieutenant marvels at the contrasting landscape of Afghanistan. "I'm surprised I remember it-and so clearly. The mud-daubed domes of the houses in the village were like egg cartons, and the splendor of the mosque stood in jarring contrast to the poverty surrounding it." (Roy Bhattacharya 38) All the main characters get up-close first person treatment in this multi-perspective narration. The story is told in inter-locking perspectives with the shifts in time done deliberately to emphasize the psychoanalytic feature of the post-modernism rather than focusing the events occurring around the battlefield.

The whole story of a contemporary novel *S.: A Novel about the Balkans* is narrated in complete flashback. The novel starts with the protagonist delivering an unwanted baby of

unknown father at the Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm. She doesn't want to touch the baby. The memory of the dirty past refuses to leave her. "They come to her in her sleep. They do not leave her alone; even here in Sweden they return, like lost luggage arriving on her heels (Drakulic 6)." Then the rest of the chapters except the last are presented as series of flashbacks. The last chapter is the continuation of the first chapter. Flashback within the flashback is also used in this novel. S. remembers her sunny days with her parents and her lover in the beach in her pitiful condition in the women's room. The introduction of series of flashbacks in the novel gives relief to the readers as well as to the protagonist after flapping through the pages of brutal violence of pain, anguish, fear, death, murder, burning of corpses, mass killing and rape given in graphical presentation.

The best example for the stream of consciousness narrative is found in the novel *The Tiller of Waters* is penned by HodaBarakat. The protagonist is caught in the web of disaster and destruction around his physical and mental world. There is an interior monologue constantly going on in his mind about his parents, his lover and all the more of the dilapidated landscape he witnesses in despair and desolation.

"My illness helped me and so did my love for my father. In my compassion for him I saw myself entering his body, my little body slipping quickly and easily into his. Why does she betray us, father? I repeated in my head, awake the whole night."Peeking out of the corner of my eye at my father's ever jovial expression, I would ask myself in burning pain what our sins could possibly be. I would try so hard to imagine some sin-of mine, of his-that we had committed unknowingly, unintentionally, and perhaps had forgotten.(Barakat 154)

This complex narration of stream of consciousness brings to light how individuals scope with the constant war and violence in their country.

Conclusion

The war novels studied deeply and directly focus on the real world of war, economic distress, political misdirection, fundamentalism, forcefully infused ideals of pseudo-patriotism and pseudo-nationalism. These concepts are as complex as they are realized in practice. In order to make the complex issues clear to the readers, the contemporary war novelists have used different narrative techniques. The non-linear narrative techniques are the best suitable for the untellable stories of mental and the physical agony and anguish suffered by the civilians and soldiers during the war and the lasting impacts it had infused in their psycho. The writers could not make the story effective by the chronological narration as seen in the novels *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Slaughterhouse-Five*. As the writers of

these novels could not continue with the linear narrative, they jump over to the non-linear narrative in the middle of the story in order to create the real impacts of war through flashbacks and forward backs. The novels *The Sorrow of War* and *Going AfterCacciato* give a photographic details of memory of the soldiers' experience of witnessing death and destruction that is going on like the stream of consciousness narration throughout the novels. The other two contemporary war novels *The Kite Runner* and *The Watch* go far beyond the conventional narration. While the *The Kite Runner* is narrated like an action packed movie with many flashbacks, forward backs and stream of consciousness narration, on the other hand the novel *The Watch* has been narrated in multiple perspectives of different point of view by allowing each character to narrate his own story of the impacts of war and thereafter. The first person narrative followed in almost all the select novels take the readers close to the characters makes the conversation intimate. These writers do not follow the conventional narrative as the wars are no more fought in traditional warfare. There is no logic and any acceptable way to fight. The present day wars are fought in the most unconventional and bizarre tactics.

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