

The Text as Narrative: Reading Ideology

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Narratives are expressions and representations of lived experiences even though they may not actually have been lived. Narratives essentially link real life form to art. Likewise, narratives of lived experience and folk narratives with their myriad ethnic or cultural experiences are also an admix of real life and art. Irrespective of how a narrative is formed, be it by an individual or a group of individuals, all narratives have an in-built element or universality at least for the domain for which it is intended and therefore circulation of a narrative is a must for its artistic survival and appreciation. Such narratives, if domain specific and therefore coherent, are likely to constitute a community that identifies itself with the narrative in terms of a remembered tradition, event or shared reasons and values. Such narratives derive their sustenance not because they essentially speak of something that is true or false but because they make their listeners feel a sense of shared meaning. As such, if a narrative tells that we will rise again from the dead, it merely describes, using a familiar metaphor, something that people actually expect to happen. Rather than being a simple case of the narrator and the narrative in question engaged in inventing and imposing metaphors of agreement, what perhaps actually guides and determines the character of the narrative to be told is the traces of lived experiences with all its knowable and unknowable elements. The key issue, in this context, therefore perhaps is to look in detail as to how such narratives create the sense it conveys and who are its target audience. In other words who or what can be trusted to represent the 'real' experiences of the group without the fear of misrepresentation? This brings one to the

question of narrative construction of identity which in turn calls for an examination of such constructions of identity and the relation between personal experience and public meanings, subjective choices and objective social locations. The relation between experience and identity is a genuine philosophical or theoretical issue in view of the gap between experiences of social actors or individuals and the theoretical construct that we call their identity.

Ingrained within the narratives, the issue, one presumes, calls for a dialogue between a thinking self and a fixed notion of authentic community. Such dialogues are expected to bring into fore all the implicit and explicit elements that account for the space between the narrative, its teller and the target audience. Such exercises basically centre on/in tracing the moments of presence and absence of the self, the world and others in an interlocution between the text and the context. It may eventually lead one to possibly end up finding a number of breaks and interruptions within what has so far looked like a coherent narrative. Consequently, the stable transmission of a fixed essence gives way to a live criss-crossing of signifiers over a dynamic and wide variety of narratives. Narratives, by virtue of an excess over the comprehension of the tradition, often contain an element of ex-centricity, which implies that they are simultaneously culturally rooted and yet produce a counter cultural domain. While it allows one to speak and not just say what one means, it promotes listening to the unheard, interprets the truth of the world and self in a way that is often unique. A constant shift between being and becoming without a realized essence, a realm of the counterfactual therefore automatically goes into it signifying a series of contingent, invented and non-narratable ensemble of experiences.

The text as a narrative, thus provides for the necessary double bind of belonging to a unified narrative of life and at the same time not belonging to what the narrative merely says. It opens up a different space of living that looks for different cultures, communities other than its own and engages one with narratives of others.

Narratives of cultural representations inhabit the epistemic construction of the migrant, gendered or ethnic identity. Narratives centred on the oriental as subjects of colonial or imperial canons of white representation has apparently given rise to a (inter)nationalist discovery of 'noble savages' in the theory and practice of politics of recognition and difference. As such, what seems to be present here is a residue of autonomy carefully vested on such colonial and late modern national subjects, indignant in their own counter hegemonic aspirations and yet struggling to discover a place of speaking by /for themselves. Caught in the exchanges between the local and the global, the centre and the periphery, the citizenship and the cultural membership, the private and the public, the subjects here are experiencing manifold challenges to locate their self-definition and the narratives of self-identity. Characterized by this existential dilemma, the narratives of mixed-blood displaced expatriate and identity here is siege from within in a transition seeking to link late modern cultural and social capital with tradition. A look at the self and the other, therefore, constantly poses a crisis in terms of having a stable definition and hence a stable narrative.

In the light of the above, one needs to look at the narrative construction of a text by authors experiencing such conflictual sensibilities. One could perhaps sum up one's inquiry into the narrative construction of cultural or gendered identity in this way:

- a. What is the efficacy of personal and cultural narratives within the current conjuncture?
- b. Who/what are the voices subdued and are expressive of the pangs of the past and present? In other words how is voice constituted in a narrative? Who speaks what and how constitutes the ideological element of representation in a text.
- c. What acquires significance, being politically correct or sensitive to politics of cultural and social knowledge systems? 'Who sees?' is a fundamental cultural question.
- d. How is tradition interpreted and looked at? What is the politics of Self-representation and what are the responses to the Other?

A quick browse through narratological discussions of voice shows Gerard Genette's inquiry into how a voice speaks in order to be distinguished from other competing voices in the text. Seymour Chatman tries to categorize types of narrators in relation to audibility of the voice. Again, the search for a voice has been interpreted as a reader's quest for the origin of the text by narratologists.

One can look at Bapsi Sidhwa's novels as an elaboration of this formulation along with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Both live in America and are women of the Indian sub-continent and yet there is an ambience of the locale, and the essences which they intend to generate to give the reader a feel of place and values—"The stifling heat, the poverty and yet the warmth which exists between the families." Chitra Banerjee's other novels like *The Mistress of Spices*, *Arranged Marriage*, and particularly *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* are sensuously evocative and a prose filled with images. Her novels have been described as 'intensely touching tales of lapsed communication, inarticulate love and redemptive memories' and therefore her text as a narrative bridges up not only distinct national identities but finds a place within for the dislocated gender. *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* is particularly significant as a collection of nine stories. In the first story a widow in California, recently arrived from India, struggles to adapt to a world in which 'neighbours are alien people.' In the title story, a painter looks to ancient myth and the example of her grandmother for help in negotiating and coming to terms with her first real crisis of faith. Covering a canvas from California to Calcutta, the narratives in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* depict the external struggle of a narrating self to find a balance between the pull of home and the global ethos of change. In one of the narratives entitled "The Lives of Strangers" a sense of ambiguity of a character called Leela is described as:

She didn't know when it was that she started thinking about India, which she had never visited. The idea attached itself to the underneath of her mind and grew like a barnacle. In her imagination the country was vast and vague, Talismanic. For some reason she associated it with rain, scavenger crows, the changing of orange

trams, and the purplish-green of elephant-ears. Were these items from some narrative her parents had told her in her childhood? (Divakaruni 2001: 61)

The question of 'who speaks?' in a narrative invites a further question of whether texts can really be said to 'speak' at all. In the case of Leela here a vague link with her 'imaginary homeland' only produces a disjunctive experience and therefore the metaphors which she uses to describe such an experience is disjointed and distorted in turn. What has been narrated is a partial representation of what the displaced sensibility had sought to narrate and this is because of the unrepresentable in representation itself. This can be elaborated from a situation in another story in the same collection entitled "The Intelligence of Wild Things." Here a sister, who lives in Sacramento goes to visit her brother in Vermont to give the news of the sad demise of their mother in Calcutta. The brother is a totally transformed man compared to what he was before he came to the United States. The sister finds a complete stranger in her brother and the contrast looms large as she recalls her mother's letter to her years back about her brother refusing to come to America in spite of getting admission for higher studies. Finally the mother exploits a sentiment called *abhimaan*, to persuade him. In the letter to her daughter she writes:

Finally I called him a coward, hiding from the world behind his mother's sari, a fool who lived in a fantasy land. . . . I said he was ungrateful and a burden to me. . . . I could see the *abhimaan* on his face, like a wound—but it was the only thing I knew that would make him go. (Divakaruni 2001: 42)

The sister ponders on the unrepresentability of the emotion called *abhimaan*, which she tries to define as "that mix of love and anger and hurt which lies at the heart of so many of our Indian tales, and for which there is no equivalent in English" (42).

In the same vein, Bapsi Sidhwa, a second generation migrant, narrates the insipid and gory tales of finding oneself in the midst of othering in *The Pakistani Bride*. Like her other novels *The Crow Eaters* and *Ice-Candy-Man*, the narrative affects a

going back to an imaginary postcolonial tribal context in transition represented in the patriarchal protagonist's desire to go back an idyllic life-world and get his adopted daughter married to a groom from his own community which he had left ages back as if that would symbolize his going back to his community in the mountains and reclaiming his lost identity. This is an ontological ungrounding of the writerly self of Bapsi Sidhwa into a contrasting representation of a tribal/pastoral death and displacement in the narrative and the ethos of unbelonging of the American material life in which she lives. Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* reveals to the western reader a way of life that is completely alien. Sidhwa writes with a passion that demolishes the smothering rules of a repressive religion and the violence of patriarchy. The narrative exposes the dramaticity of marriage and an 'innocent eroticism' which is touching but ironical of the narrative the children, Qasim and Afshan bring to the wedding bed. The situation is something like this:

"Are you my husband?" she asked incredulously. Qasim nodded with woe begone gravity. The girl didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She had been told that her groom was very young, but she had thought that he would be like herself at least fifteen. She began to laugh, while tears of disappointment slid down her cheeks. She laughed uncontrollably and Qasim, strung to the quick, rushed for the door. He threw himself against the bolted door and rattling it savagely, shouted 'Open! Open! I want to get out.' A distant sound of tired chatter crept in through the door. Flushed with anger and embarrassment Qasim sidled to a corner of the room. Sobbing angrily, he at last fell asleep. (Sidhwa 1990: 10)

This is how narratives represent an aesthetic of ideological production by uncovering the hegemonic centres of oppressive systems and values, which cannot be always fought in the form of an open combat. Narratives often serve the function of an off-stage resistance which is a 'hidden transcript' (James C. Scott: 1992) of language and subjectivity. This mode of a narrative which have ideological content by way of a collaborative process of interrogation (of patriarchal symbolic order) and contestation is in the process of 'becoming' what is known as 'socially sym-

bolic acts.' A narrative text represents the aesthetics of an ideological production when the symbolic and the imaginary get submerged in uncovering the 'historical fullness' through what Frederic Jameson calls an 'ideological analysis' (Jameson 1981: 20).

Texts of the kind discussed here, which have found a place within the framework of the multicultural and multiethnic literatures of the United States, by performing ideological and symbolic functions contribute to debates about community, justice and freedom. Many works by racial and ethnic minorities develop ethical concepts out of particular contexts and experiences and present them from/for transcultural evaluation and application (Ramon Saldivar: 1990). These texts as narratives can offer ethical problems/solutions to members of other cultural groups in a manner of shared 'relative values' which have universal characteristics. In narratives which describe or share specific experiences of colours or gender, the political predicament is judged on the basis of how far an individual can speak for a group. For example, if no one woman or a woman can know and represent the experiences of all women, on what authority can she speak 'as a woman'? At best, she might be able to speak accurately of her own unique experience of being a woman (in this case a woman of the Indian sub-continent). But then she speaks only as a woman. The issue of authority of experience is intimately tied to the problem of representation. If a woman cannot be trusted to speak for/about "women" then how is it possible to speak at all for/about a woman. On the other hand, in speaking for the other women, a representation then takes an ideological role where, by subsuming the experiences of other/marginalized women into the broader category of "woman" one is engaging in the practice of ideological normalization and exclusion.

In attempting at such narrative representations the authors actually put ideology to work, uncovering coercion of forces that tend to silence a text. A text cannot be 'ethically' read as a narrative without reading ideology as a substance of imagination—real and imaginary. Again ideology must always be necessarily narrative in its structure because it involves a mapping of the

'real.' It also underwrites the stories about what one conceives of as real. The aesthetics of ideological production involves a narrative attempt of the subject to inscribe a place for itself in a collective and historical process, as these authors discussed here have done.

Works Cited

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