

Memory in Julian Barnes' the Sense of an Ending and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children.

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Abstract: *In any work of fiction, narration or narrative technique is given much importance and is often considered as the element which decides the success of that particular work. Narration has long been experimented by modern and post-modern writers. They created new modes of narrating stories and experiences and also opened up possibilities for different levels of reading and interpreting a work. They went to the level of destructing or denouncing the very narrative they worked on. The term "unreliable narrator" has long existed even before 20th century; however, it was the modern and post modern writers who gave readers a variety of different forms of unreliable narration. Among them, in particular, memory known for its trickiness has the ability to transform an account of an individual's narration into an unreliable one. The fake memory alters the so called "true account" of narration into an erratic one, surprising both readers and narrator or the readers alone. This paper focuses on the unreliability of memory in Julian Barnes' The Sense of an Ending and Salman Rushdie's The Midnight's Children.*

Key words: *Narration, Narrative Technique, Unreliable narrator, Memory*

I. Introduction

In their Introduction titled "Towards a Paradigm of Memory in Literature", Benjamin Hart Fishkin, Adaku T. Ankumah, Festus Fru Ndeh, and Bill F. Ndi claim "Literature" as "a direct consequence and offspring of memory (28)." However, the accuracy and reliability of memory has long been contested where psychologists, historians and literary scholars belonging to the twentieth century have conducted researches on the fallible nature of memories and on the discrepant and inconsistent nature of narration and history. Memory is defined as a recollection of past events or events happened in the immediate past. It is recorded in terms of narratives in the form of diaries, documents, testimonies, autobiographies etc. David Gallo defines memory in his article on "Associations and Errors through History" that "Memory is not simply recording of the past, but is a deliberate "piecing-together" of retrieved information and other relevant information in an effort to make sense of the past"(13). However, efforts to recollect memories can turn out to be fatal if the recollected memories prove fallible. For not all memories are authentic and genuine. They undergo changes and are often constructed by the individual consciously or unconsciously. It is best explained by Daniel L. Schacter who formulated seven types of faulty memory which he termed as "The Seven Sins of Memory". These seven sins of memory are transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias and persistence. Among them, it is the sin of transience (forgetting past events) which is frequently found in literature.

Mark A. Oakes and Ira E. Hyman, Jr. in their article titled "The Changing Face of Memory and Self: False Memories, False Self" state that "Memory is always constructed. What people remember will be constructed from remaining materials and from general schematic knowledge structures... The fact that memory is constructed also means that history is constructed" (62). Hence with the fallible memory, the narrative and the individual history or rather history in general also appears to be unreliable. Harmon and Holman described the expression unreliable narrator in *A Handbook to Literature* (2006) as a "narrator who may be in error in his understanding or report of things and who thus leaves readers without the guides needed for making judgments" (537). However, it was Wayne C. Booth who discovered and formulated the concept of unreliable narrator in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). He came up with four types of unpredictability in narrators:

I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not. If [the narrator] is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed. It is most often a matter of what James calls 'inconscience', the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him. Sometimes it is almost impossible to infer whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible. (*Fiction* 158-60)

Greta Olson in the article "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators" briefs on another German scholar Ansgar Nunning's concept of Unreliable narrators. In his monograph titled

Unreliable Narration, he questions Booth for ruling out the role of the implied readers in his theory of Unreliable narrators. Olson sums up "Nunning's list of textual signal" to identify the authenticity of narrators:

...(1) the narrator's explicit contradictions and other discrepancies in the narrative discourse; (2) discrepancies between the narrator's statements and actions; (3) divergences between the narrator's description of herself and other characters' descriptions of her; (4) contradictions between the narrator's explicit comments on other characters and her implicit characterization of herself or the narrator's involuntary exposure of herself; (5) contradictions between the narrator's account of events and her explanations and interpretations of the same, as well as contradictions between the story and discourse; (6) other characters' corrective verbal remarks or body signals; (7) multiperspectival arrangements of events and contrasts between various versions of the same events; (8) an accumulation of remarks relating to the self as well as linguistic signals denoting expressiveness and subjectivity; (9) an accumulation of direct addresses to the reader and conscious attempts to direct the reader's sympathy; (10) syntactic signals denoting the narrator's high level of emotional involvement, including exclamations, ellipses, repetitions, etc.; (11) explicit, self-referential, metanarrative discussions of the narrator's believability; (12) an admitted lack of reliability, memory gaps, and comments on cognitive limitations; (13) a confessed or situation-related prejudice; (14) paratextual signals such as titles, subtitles, and prefaces. (adapted from Unreliable 27-28)

When we scrutinize the different narrative point of view, it is often the first person narrative which gives room for suspicion. The above mentioned signals are mostly found in text which is narrated from first person point of view. The same view has been established by William Riggan in *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs and Clowns: The Unreliable First Person Narrator*:

First-person narration is, then, always at least potentially unreliable, in that the narrator, with these human limitations of perception and memory and assessment, may easily have missed, forgotten, or misconstrued certain incidents, words, or motives. ... Much of what s/he [the I-narrator] tells us

also gives us an idea of what he himself is like and has 'a certain characterizing significance over and above its data value, by virtue of the fact that he is telling it to us.' His narrative cannot be accepted purely in absolute terms of true or false, probable or improbable, reliable or unreliable, convincing or unconvincing. (19 -20)

This paper proposes to highlight the presentation of memory distortion in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* which in turn alters and deforms the authenticity of narration and history. It is a scientifically proven fact that memories tend to alter, fade, and undergo transformation in course of time. The narrators of *The Sense of an Ending* and *Midnight's Children* experience the same where they try to recollect, record their individual history but experience lapse in memory. They are well aware of the shortcomings in their narration and often remind the readers about the distortion of certain memories. Though both the texts are termed as Post modern novels, they deal with different culture and history. They also differ in the style and genre where *Midnight's Children* has magic realism and metafictional aspects which are missing in Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*. In spite of their basic differences they do share some commonalities.

There are many common threads connecting both text and its writers. Both Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie are contemporary Post modern writers who have established place for themselves in the field of literature. Another striking similarity between the authors is that they have won the Booker Prize (now known as the Man Booker Prize) for the novels discussed in this article. Salman Rushdie won the Booker Prize for *Midnight's Children* in 1981 and Julian Barnes won the Man Booker Prize for *The Sense of an Ending* in 2011. Both have openly acknowledged the fact that they have consciously attempted to present their narrators with errata or distorted memory. In an interview titled "Conversation: Julian Barnes, winner of 2011 Man Booker Prize" with Jeffrey Brown posted in the website PBS NewsHour, Julian Barnes states that:

I wanted to write a book about time and memory, about what time does to memory, how it changes it, and what memory does to time. It's also a book about discovering at a certain point in your life that some key things that you've always believed were wrong. This is something that I started thinking about a few years ago, and it's probably one of the preoccupations that you have as you age. You have your own memories of life, you've got the story that you tell mainly to yourself about what your life has been. And every so often these certainties are not. Something happens, someone reports something from 20 or 30 years ago, and you realize that what you'd believed is not the case. So I wanted to write about that.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie briefs on *Midnight's Children*:

...what I was actually writing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect, and I

knew that my India may only have been one to which I (who am no longer what I was, and who by quitting Bombay never became what perhaps I was meant to be) was willing to admit I belonged. This is why I made my narrator, Saleem, suspect in his narration: his mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance, and his vision is fragmentary.

Both the novels are narrated from the first person point of view. The main protagonists from each novel narrate sequences from their life or rather they narrate their individual history. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony Webster who is sixty and retired narrates sequences from his life. He begins his narration by listing a few images that he came across during these sixty years. In the course of the novel, Tony discovers truth about his 'Self'. Right from the very first line the narrator is cautious and treads carefully while narrating his life. He begins by saying that "I remember, in no particular order:" and goes on to describe the images he remembers and ends the paragraph by saying "This last isn't something I actually saw, but what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (3). Next he discusses about how he never clearly understood time and emotions which either runs fast or slow and finally fades "never to return"(3). He begins with a disclaimer: "I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage" (4). He narrates fragments from his life which on the surface appears to be in a linear form. He begins his narrative with school days moving gradually to college life and life before and after marriage and finally the present retirement life.

In the course of his narration on his childhood, he reminisces about his school days especially the class discussions on general history and national history. In one such discourse on history, Adrian Finn, Tony's friend quotes Patrick Lagrange that "History is the certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (17). Thus, Julian Barnes registers the "imperfections" of both memory and history which in turn transforms the narrative into an erratic one.

Although *Midnight's Children* is narrated from first person point of view, the narrator, Saleem Sinai who is thirty one, does a parallel narration of both individual and national history. The novel begins with Saleem's description of the time and day on which he was born. He uses a conversational tone and his narration runs very fast as he wants to record his life before he loses his memory completely. Like Tony, Sinai is well aware of the "imperfections" of his memory and exclaims, "...in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. We must live, I'm afraid, with the shadows of imperfections" (529). Having born on the night, when India got its Independence, Saleem, like all other children born on that day, has supernatural telepathic power. In his article on "The Reliability of the Narrator in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*" Ronan McFadden explains how Saleem's narrative moves beyond his control that there are lot of errors in his narration which he openly acknowledges: "I am racing ahead at breakneck speed; errors are possible, and overstatements, and jarring alterations in tone; I'm racing the cracks, but I remain conscious that errors have already been made, and that, as my decay accelerates [...] the risk of unreliability grows" (Rushdie 1995, 270).

In the course of the novel, he declares that in spite of the mistakes he made in his narrative, he still believes that: 'I told you the truth,' I say yet again, 'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.' (Rushdie 1995, 211) Both the characters are well aware of the drawbacks in their narration. However, in spite of its imperfections, they prefer their own version of history or their own memory.

Tony uses various expressions and statements throughout the novel to remind the readers that his narrative is entirely based on memories which he is no longer sure of. But this very act of assuring and reminding only adds reliability to his narrative. It somehow forces the readers into believing his narrative. Some of the phrases and assertions made by Tony are: "Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange" (19), "...I couldn't at this distance testify" (27), "...this is my principal factual memory. The rest consists of impressions and half-memories which may therefore be self-serving" (27, 28), "But few other memories come back to me" (35), "I don't think I can properly convey the effect the moment had on me" (36), "I wish I'd kept that letter, because it would have been proof, corroboration. Instead, the only evidence comes from my memory" (39), "Actually to be true to my memory, as far as that's ever possible..."(41), "Again I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of what was happening at that time" (41), "As far as I remember..." (42), "But I remember..." (44) etc.

A solid proof which contradicts Tony's story appears later in the novel. It is only after Veronica, his ex-girlfriend hands over his letter that the readers can identify Tony as an unreliable narrator. Tony, who so far let the readers believe that he had sent a no objection letter to Adrian to date his ex-girlfriend, Veronica, is

equally shocked to see the long vehement letter that he had written to Adrian and Veronica cursing them. Tony realises that the distortion of memory could change anything and everything that so long was considered factual. He exclaims, "How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but – mainly – to ourselves" (95). Thus, the unreliability of Tony's narration is slowly exposed to the readers like that of a mystery.

Unlike Tony, Saleem in *Midnight's Children* openly confesses the errors in his narrative. He often emphasis and minds the readers about his imperative need to record his memory immediately and in a speed beyond his control and hence his narration would be unreliable and fallible. He uses expressions like "fill in the gaps", "confide in paper, before I forget" (Rushdie 1995, 37), "Admitting defeat, I am forced to record that I cannot remember for sure" (Rushdie 1995, 386), "scraps of memory", "guided by the few clues one is given" (Rushdie 1995, 427), "events, which have tumbled from my lips any old how, garbled by haste and emotion" (Rushdie 1995, 30) etc. Sometimes he appears to dread the mistakes in his narration:

It occurs to me that I have made another error – that the election of 1957 took place before, and not after, my tenth birthday; but although I've racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events. This is worrying. I don't know what's gone wrong. [...] if small things go, will large things be close behind? (Rushdie 1995, 222)

But he contradicts himself when he challenges the readers to check the facts presented by him, "If you don't believe me, check" (Rushdie 1995, 48). Furthermore, at one point of time he reveals that he had lied to the readers. "I lied about Shiva's death. [...] I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred" (Rushdie 1995, 443). In the same way, Tony while relating about his relationship with his daughter, with whom he gets along well, writes that his daughter being young might stop seeing him in future but soon he chides himself and says: "No I exaggerate, I misrepresent" (61).

II. Conclusion

Thus, both the novels present narration based on recollected memory and narrators who are well aware of their faulty memory and who acknowledge the unreliable and fallible nature of their narratives. Yet, they are capable of making the readers rely or believe their narrative up to certain level in the novel. Faulty or false memory has led both their individual history and narrative imperfect thereby making their very "self" imperfect. Mark A. Oakes and Ira E. Hyman, Jr. in their article "The Changing Face of Memory and Self: False Memories, False Self", express the same idea that "People create false memories...Because the self is constructed from memories, the self will be a false self, based on beliefs and memories that do not accurately represent the past" (61).

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