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## Narrative Techniques in Sudhindra Nath Ghose's Tetralogy of Novels

**Chirag R. Adatiya**

Ph.D Researcher,

Department of English & Comparative Literary Studies,

Saurashtra University,

Rajkot, Gujarat.

### Abstract:

Narrative technique examines how a narration is done in a work of fiction and what are the multiple devices of storytelling in a work such as a novel. This paper examines the narrative techniques used by Sudhindra Nath Ghose in his four novels- *And Gazelles Leaping* (1949), *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951), *The Vermilion Boat* (1953) and *The Flame of the Forest* (1955)- form a tetralogy knit together by the central figure of the protagonist-narrator, about twenty years of whose life and career they cover. Yet, while his fictional world displays some features of the novel of the 1930s and 1940s, it is also strikingly idiosyncratic. The tetralogy is actually a bildungsroman and its central theme is the growth of the narrator's mind. All his experiences and mental conflicts are faithfully recorded in the novels. Thus, the nature of the narrative is determined by the Bildungsroman genre and therefore the researcher explores both these literary topics in order to establish the particulars of the four novels.

**Keywords: Tetralogy, Bildungsroman, Narrative Technique, Indo-Anglian novels**

*"Indians can only write Puranas-that is, parables, philosophical parables, half-immersed in time and half in the mystery of being."*<sup>1</sup> – Raja Rao

The earliest specimens of Indian English fiction were tales rather than novels proper, but their use of fantasy shows their links with the ancient Indian tradition, in spite of the fact that their subject matter is contemporary. The digressional method of story-telling is perhaps the oldest device in narrative literature. The *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata* and the popular tales, such as those of the *Panchatantra*, are full of digressions and stories within stories. This technique has found favour with Sanskrit prose writers like Banbhata and Dandin. In the now famous forward to *Kanthapura* Raja Rao claimed that this was a characteristically Indian technique of narration, he mentions: "Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was, and still is, the ordinary style of our story telling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story." (qtd. in *The Twice Born Fiction*, 131) The same style of narration is adopted in Bible as well as in Greek epics. This is the oral tradition of story-telling. In her seminal work, *Twice Born Fiction*, Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

The earliest narrative works of any literature –religious or secular- are closer to the oral tradition and therefore they have this leisurely digressional manner of unfolding. Sometimes numerous interpolations are added to the original work through the centuries, and even if it was not an oral composition in the beginning, it soon acquires the distinctive marks of an oral tradition in the process of being spoken aloud or recited by succeeding generations. (Ibid.)

The tetralogy of novels written by Sudhin N. Ghose (1899-1965) is a good example of such parables. An air of fantasy, a detachment from chronological time pervades these novels.

Ghose's narrative technique discards the Aristotelian concept of plot and employing the ancient Sanskrit device of the framing story interpolated with inserted tales told by different characters. These tales are from diverse sources such as the ancient epics and Puranas, legend and folk-lore and even history. *And Gazelles Leaping* is full of parables narrated by various characters. The postman (Peon-Dada to the children) tells them a story about the fate of people who laughs at strangers quoting Bhartihari's saying:

A diamond you may draw

From an alligator's jaw;

You may cross the raging ocean like a pool;

A cobra you may wear

Like a blossom in your hair;

But you can never convince a stubborn fool. (93)

Moti-Didi tells the narrator a story about a mouse and a dancing girl being punished or praised excessively for what they had done (151-54); a wandering monk explains through parables his precept that, "*Freedom from fear is the first step towards happiness*" (128-29); the Punditji recounts the parable of "what the thunder said" to show the varying reactions of people to the same thing (169-71); even Karin, sister Svenska's help, tells the children a story about the wisdom of the legendary Vikramaditya of Ujjain. The longest digression occurs as a flashback when the young boy finds himself face to face with the juvenile thugs who threaten to blind Mohan, his pet elephant, if he does not join them. He remembers Daftary Cha-Cha, the bookbinder, who had told him the story of Porus magnanimously treated by Alexander, but he realises that he can expect no royal behaviour on the part of these ruffians; he recollects Cha-Cha's advice to combat and destroy the agents of evil (140-41). He thinks of the picture frame maker, whom he had met when he was staying with his cousin in Chandernagore. He thinks of the long philosophical discussion in his shop consequent to the man killing all the bugs that used to bite the little child. The frame-maker asked the visitors, the Padre Sahib and the schoolmaster, if he had done the right thing, and the school master reassured him by narrating the story of Dipankara Kashyapa, the sage, who interrupted a sermon on charity to warn the audience to destroy a poisonous snake that had approached them (124-127). The narrator recollects the young teacher who always opposed the traditional school master (128-31) and one finds the most important theme of the tetralogy, tradition versus modernity, introduced at this crucial point. As observed by Shyamala A. Narayana, "But the long digression does not interfere with dramatic propriety, as it is quite natural for the past to flash through the narrator's mind at a moment of stress, when he is debating with himself the future course of action" (95-96)<sup>2</sup>

The protagonist in this phase, being a nursery school child, is mostly on the receiving end. He is an ordinary child who neither startles the reader with his precocity nor bewitches him with his superhuman feats, yet he is very sensitive. All these tales narrated by different characters become an agent in quest of psychological insight and awareness of him.

His *Cradle of the Clouds* is the perfect example for his use of story within a story. Whenever anything is mentioned, there is a long digression to explain it. Thus, all the occurrences during the boy's stay in the village are conveyed during his leave-taking from the villagers at the end of his school days. The villagers warn him against Calcutta, and the word *Calcuttan*, with a slight twist in pronunciation, suggests Black Dog. Then follows a digression about

Yama and his Black Dog, the efficacy of mantras, and the Punditji's learned explanation. All this, feels the narrator, is a curious way of congratulating him, and he is reminded of the "elliptical fashion" (as mentioned by Shyamala A. Narayana) of giving advice the villagers specialize in. This leads to illustrations of this strange method, and the readers learn of the narrator's experiences with the village "instrument maker" and carpenter, who refuse to teach him because he is not of their caste; they feel that he is marked out to be a scholar. This leads to a digression on the villagers' admiration for scholarship, and the narrator's feelings towards the pedantic principal of the Hatkura Intermediate College, and the Second Master, Hem Chandra Chahar, and he describes his final disillusionment with the Second Master, which happened during the Ploughing Ceremony. This brings us to the most important part of the book- the drought and the Ploughing Ceremony. This complex method of story within a story also suggests that the process of maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world, is not easy. In fact, there are many failures along the way.

The third novel, *The Vermillion Boat*, shows the young boy in Calcutta, attaining maturity emotionally and legally. This novel is remarkable for detailed picture of Calcutta it presents. In the style of the *sthala-puranas* (legendary history of a place), Ghose recounts in meticulous detail the rituals that went with founding of Calcutta by Job Charnock in 1690. The structure of the novel gets cohesion because of the repeated symbol of the vermilion boat.

The myths he uses are the well known epic or *Puranic* myths which are easily communicable to all Indian readers. The fourth novel, *The Flame of the Forest*, is not as well organized as the other three. In this novel, he uses the only myth is that of Nahush, the king of the *Mahabharata* who lost his sense of *matra* (measure, proportion, a concept central to the novel) and turned into such a tyrant that he insulted even the seven sages. Here, one finds that the protagonist has become a young man in full control of his environment and in possession of the qualities which an educated man should possess. Following the practice of the Sanskrit *Campu Kavya* Ghose mixes prose and verse and introduces into the narrative songs in Bengali with musical notations. Shyamala A. Narayana mentions:

Ghose is not interested primarily in telling a story; his chief concern is the creation of beauty in words- no Western concepts of plot construction hamper him in the complex interweaving of stories, proverbs, incidents and songs. The prose is freely intermingled with verse in the manner of Sanskrit literature; verse is used for a concise expression of a Penhari proverb, the songs of Radha that the *Kirtani* Myna sings, the hymn that the school children of Svenska's kindergarten hear on Christmas day, or the Sanskrit poetry with which the narrator tries to impress Dr. Ansthruther. (166)<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally, narrative techniques are explained through point of view in novel. There are three points of view to present a narrative: first person point of view when the narrator is one of the characters, he participates in the actions and also comments on the events. Third person point of view when the narrator narrates the story in an objective manner and omniscient point of view where the narrator is God like and can also make his presence felt with authorial intrusions. In his tetralogy, Ghose uses first person narrative, and nowhere is the narrator named (though he is called Balram as part of the ploughing ceremony in *Cradle of the Clouds*). The first person narrative has encouraged reviewers and librarians to treat the books as memoirs, in fact, the National Library files the books under the section dealing with biography and memoirs, and the *National Bibliography of Indian Literature* (Sahitya

Akademi, 1962) does not list them under fiction; they are included as memoirs. M.K. Naik writes:

The fictional 'I' of the narrator is the only concession that Ghose makes to the western fictional form. In virtually all other respects, his model is the oriental tale. Like his original, he makes no distinction between this world and the other, both to him being equally real. Hence, he tells the story of the South Indian village, which, cursed by a holy man, floated in the air to land in the North with as much conviction as he evinces in talking about the corruption in Calcutta. Likewise, the human and the animal worlds too do not remain separate. An elephant, a fish and a dog feel, think and act like human beings. (235)

Furthermore, the characters are often presented more as archetypes than as complex individuals, and carry symbolic overtones. Thus, the nameless, disinherited and orphaned protagonist is himself an apt representative of the modern man who has gained the West only to lose the East, and whose education should therefore comprise a recovery of his last heritage. Hardly anyone other than the narrator is a fully rounded character. Each person is characterized by some particular quality, whether the Punditji by wisdom, Jogin-Da by roguery, or Kolej Huzoor by worldly wisdom and success.

In form and technique, his novels are completely Indian, and he was the first to make extended use of quotations from Indian literature in fiction. Yet he was been mostly neglected by the critics of Indian English literature. Apart from Meenakshi Mukherjee, hardly anyone has analysed his work in depth. It is a hopeful sign that M.K. Naik has done justice to him in his history of Indian English literature published by the Sahitya Akademi; one hopes that Ghose will get the critical scrutiny he deserves. From the angle of narrative technique, an analysis of the Bildungsroman's characteristics concerning the meaning, character, point of view and plot offers a useful insight into its development. The Bildungsroman form itself embraces the theme of development and change, since it covers the luminal spaces of one's life, i.e. the end of childhood and beginning of maturity. In the same way, Sudhin Ghosh also adopts the change in his narrative technique capturing the Indian tradition generally neglected by the Indian English novelist.

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**Notes:**

- (1) In this paper, 1 follows that the same is quoted by Shyamala A. Narayana in his paper on "Sudhin N. Ghose", see the above citation for full details.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Here, 3 refers an article by Shyamala A. Narayana titled as "Reality and fantasy in the Novels of Sudhin N. Ghose."