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A Study of Flashback Technique in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract:

Flashback narration is a narrative technique used by the author to reveal the past of the characters in the story. It is a device that has been in use since the beginning of the literature either oral or written and the reason of using this device in the narrative is to shape the fictional world where human being lives and dies surrounded by that entire object which is found in the real world. The creation of such illusion is one of the tasks of the author in order to create air of reality in the fiction because if there are human being in the fiction they would surely which they would like to share with the narrate or implied reader. My present paper is an attempt to understand the use of flash back technique in the Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) which won Man Booker prize for year 2008. In my paper I have also given a short detail of the flashback technique.

Keywords: Analepsis, Flashback, reality, narrator, reflector, memory, narrative, illusion of reality.

Novelist creates a fictional world in which characters lives and dies like people do in real world; like a man recounts his past in order to reveal it to the person; in the same way a character/narrator does it in the fictional world. Such way of recounting past in the fiction is considered as flash back which has become a popular narrative device in order to bring illusion of reality in the narrative. For making a narrative seems real, authors like Henry James, Percy Lubbock, Wayne C. Booth devoted them to the making of the novel and started evaluating and examining the narrative construction. Henry James was the first one to bring the attention of the academia towards this problem of understanding narrative technique. He found that a novel is not only a creation of author's mind but also a mirror that shows readers the picture of a 'supposed real' world; and when a reader plunges into the consciousness of the characters, it helps them in understanding their world. For this authors and critics invented multiples devices to give fiction a illusion of reality; flashback or analepsis is one among them.

Using analepsis has never been a new technique in literary world. The story-tellers of the Great epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Odyssey* have already used flash back narration to provide details of the characters in the story. It has been popularized in fiction in the beginning of twentieth century when authors like James Joyce; Virginia Woolf used it in order to reveal the

inner consciousness, past of the characters to the reader. A device like flash back has helped fiction in getting air of reality in it. Reality is not only required in the subject of story but also in the way story has been narrated by its narrator or implied author; and a narrative needs to be real because it does not only entertain but also affects the life of reader who associate them with the characters and their life in the fictional world. It has often been considered by academicians that the invention of cinema brought flashback into existence which is while one can easily trace back its history on the way of a new novelistic approach where characters were made to think like human beings. Such revival of past events that is going on in the mind of a character takes reader back into the world of character where a reader feels and sees all the past events moving in front of his/her eyes like a picture. Like Stephen Spender says:

The stock accounts given of reminiscence give the impression that when a person recalls an episode.... The details of episode must come to him in imagery. He must 'see' the details 'in his mind's eye', or 'hear' them 'in his head'. (31, Ahmad)

This hearing or seeing details gives us a picture of consciousness that flows like a stream, like a river in one's eyes. The only difference between cinema and literature is the way of presentation; like in cinema viewers can watch an episode of past like a scene or picture while in literature one can only feel the sensation in one's mind's eyes or ears. This is all is the result of the portrayal of one's memory that plays a vital role in the life of a human being. It is the gift of reminding events that gives human being a power to travel back in past through its memory. It can be easily found in a work of autobiography where narrator describes the memory, Shakeel Ahmad in the preface of his book *A Study of Flashback as Technique* writes about such gift to human being:

Man is different from its nearest predecessor for having a past that keeps him on his toe from the cradle to his grave. Past is man's eternal burden; it's also his eternal bliss. No wonder therefore, that man possesses an indomitable, though unfledged, instinct for resurrecting all that was once a stirring song of love, or an exciting turn of luck or a pulsing aches of betrayal- here in mood of self indulgence, and there in that of amused otherness. (11, Ahmad)

All the memory sad or happy appears to the eyes of the reader but the only difference in such narration is its beginning which Shakeel Ahmad refers as end as the beginning. Such reversal of the chronology of action improves the genuineness of the fiction as a literary text. It allows reader to plunge into the consciousness of the character in order to understand the reliability of the narration. If the narrator is using words like 'perhaps', 'I think so', 'it might be', it means he/she has a faded memory and he/she can't be trusted but if he is narrating the events with confidence and uses devices like poster, letter, or any other device to recount the past, narrator can be trusted. Sometimes the table turns like a story does not follow a simple path rather narration begins from the end. One can find the end as the beginning in films like James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), or Mohan Kumar's *Avtaar* (1983) or R K Narayan's *The Guide*

(1958) which begins from the middle of the story. Aravind Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008) which brought Man Booker prize in 2008 is a good example of flash back narration.

In the novel protagonist of the novel Balram Halwai alias Munna writes letter to the Chinese Premier Mr. Wen Jiabao recounting his past. He does so because he heard an announcement on All India Radio that Chinese Premier is to visit India and his mission is to know about the truth of Bangalore and its entrepreneur. Here the story begins and Balram says, "My blood froze. If anyone knows the truth about Bangalore, it's me." (4, *The White Tiger*) and begins the narration by informing him about the truth of India. Here in the fiction Adiga has not only given full control of narration to narrator but has also given him a chance to communicate in the grand but old way of communication i. e. letter. Such narration is referred as Epistolary narration which has also been used by Samuel Richardson in his epoch making novel *Pamela* (1740), also considered as the first English Novel. Adiga's protagonist narrator narrates his story to tell about his desire to be rich and independent and the step which he has taken for it. He writes these letters in a very cunning way. He does not start telling his story directly rather he describes about the best things of China like a bard used to invoke a higher authority like God, Goddess, benefactor etc. before the beginning of their work; and then he recounts his past. He writes about an incidence which made him realized that he was a half baked and he needed to know more about the world and worldly thing. He writes-

One day, as I was driving my ex-employer Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam in their Honda City car, Mr. Ashok put a hand on my shoulder, and said, Pull over to the side.' Following this command, he leaned forward so close that I could smell his aftershave – it was delicious, fruitlike smell that day- and said politely as ever, Balram, I have a few questions to ask you all right?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

'Balram,' Mr Ashok asked, how many planets are there in the sky?'

I gave the answer as best as I could.

'Balram, who was the first prime minister of India?'

And then: 'Balram, what is the difference between a Hindu and a Muslim?'

And then: 'What is the name of our continent?'

Mr Ashok leaned back and asked Pinky Madam, Did you hear his answers?'

(9-10, *The White Tiger*)

Lines quoted above do not only show us a glimpse of an event of his past but the trauma of the incidence is so clear that even today he is able to hear the echo of those words in his mind's ear clearly. After giving a brief introduction of his story to narrate, he starts telling his life story.

First he informs about his past and goes on narrating by using various devices that reminds him of his past and provides proof to the recounted events. When he starts telling about how he began his journey as entrepreneur he refers that incidence as an 'act of entrepreneur'; and that act of entrepreneurship has brought him in the world where he is living currently. He has kept the poster which sought an accused of murder and of course the murderer is none other than the narrator. He uses that poster to begin the story of his life. Such devices are required for creating a situation that is needed to remind the past. After describing the beginning of the poster, he goes on telling about his life since the beginning. His beginning does not begin with sentences like when I was born or where I was born rather he goes on describing the event as the beginning which made him realize that he was half baked. That's why he describes his school first while recounting the memory of his past. He quotes the poster which he keeps with him to remind him of his real self. The device helps the narrator to remember the past. It gives a reliable picture of the narrative consciousness. It lets a character remember its memory which is not blurred anymore. Whenever Balram looks at the poster he remembers his journey from 'darkness' to 'light'. He tells his name:

'Balram Halwai alias Munna...'

(13, *The White Tiger*)

The line takes him back to his past and he is able to recount the first day of his school:

'See, my first day in school,'

He says, "See...", as if he is showing a picture to the reader as well as to the narrate and then he shows the scene that enables reader to look into his mind-

...the teacher made all the boys line up and come to his desk so he could put our names down in his register. When I told him what my name was, he gaped at me:

'Munna? That's not a real name.'

He was right: it just means 'boy'.

'That's all I have got, sir,' I said.

It was true. I'd never been given a name.

(13)

The episode which narrator is describing about is not taking place chronically rather already have taken place. Narrator is just reminding that episode and enabling reader to observe that incidence by looking into the mind of the narrator Balram Halwai himself. He shares his past with the reader and it has made him a narrator with a consciousness which is required for being a true fictive reality. This is how narrator has begun the story. He does not talk about present and past rather he is showing the episode of his life one by one to the readers. He competes with life and struggle everyday and has decided to narrate his story by writing letters to the Premier. The process of writing letter is going on chronically like first day; second day; third day ... while the

time has been reversed in telling the events of life. Shakeel Ahmad writes calls it end as beginning:

“All that has been said about it is that this method institutes end as the beginning of the story in a work of fiction.... What I, therefore, assume at once is that this instituting the ‘end’ as the ‘beginning’, is the prime mover, the controlling agent of form of fiction. By instituting the ‘end’ as the beginning’, this method explicitly assumes the role of recreating or reweaving the patterns or design of the incidents already past. Memory is the implement of this reweaving: what it reweaves is reality that has already transpired in its natural sequence of time. In fact it is a reality reborn with the creative bias of re-ordering or re-arranging events.”
(22, Ahmad)

This rearranging of events which reborn the reality by memorizing and recounting past has doubled the authenticity of the narration. As per Shakeel Ahmad it has impregnated the moment with creative potencies, or aesthetic possibilities. The authenticity of such aesthetic possibilities would be more proved if the narration being done is free of the faded memory as it is the memory which plays the supreme in such kind of fictions where the wheel of time has been reversed. This wheel of time reverse properly if memory is not playing hide and seek with the narrator or projector of that memory and Balram who is a good listener and observer does not let any part of the memory left in between. He truly follows the memory image as Maureen Turim writes in *Flashbacks in Films* that flashback is all about ‘spontaneous recall of memory image’ because-

Memory, in its psychoanalytic and philosophic dimensions, is one of the concepts inscribed in flashbacks, Memory surges forth, it strengthens or protects or it repeats and haunts. A plethora of depicted memories are offered across the history of flashback use, each slightly different in form, ideology, tone. Some are subjective, interiorized; others represent a telling in language whose degree of subjectivity might be considerably less.
(2, Turim)

Balram, the narrator, narrates his life story without letting his memory faded. He recalls the events and tells about the reflector Balram’s childhood and how it has affected the mindset of the narrator Balram. He is so upset due to the death of his mother that he has accepted the Ganges as a Black river because it was the ‘black mud’ of the river which sucked the body of his mother and his mother’s corpse was not allowing it to happen. When her body has been finally sucked in by the river he decided to leave this ‘black river’ for the tourist. He writes:

This mud was holding her back: this big, swelling mound of the black ooze. She was trying to fight the black mud; her toes were fixed and resisting; but the mud was sucking her in. It was so thick, and more of it was being created every moment as the river washed into the ghat. Soon she would become part of the black mound and the pale-skinned dog would start licking her....
(18, *The White Tiger*)

I haven't been back to see the Ganga since then: I am leaving that river for the American tourist. (18)

Narrator Balram has decided from the child Balram's experiences that he would never go back to that river. The trauma of the experience is so clear that he also suggest the narrate not to visit that black river. Balram has narrated the story from his experience. He has narrated how he came to Dhanbad and then to New Delhi and how he learnt to become corrupt. He justifies his corruption by blaming Ashok Sharma because these all change occurred in the owner of the Honda City and if the owner of the Honda City is corrupt, how its chauffeur can remain innocent. In the process of narration Balram has kept full control on the narration. Whenever he feels that he is no more able to write the letter, he stops and takes rest. After being refreshed he again starts the narration. Author Artavind Adiga has given his full attention to the narration of the story. His narrative has a strong hold on the attention of the reader because he never allows his narrator to become restless. If the narrator is feeling tired or he has some other work he stops writing and he goes tpo complete his task as the owner of the White Tiger Technology Drivers. He writes:

See, that night, I was sitting here, telling you my life's story, when my landline began to ring. Still chatting to you, I picked up the receiver and heard Mohammad Asif's voice.

'Sir, there's been some trouble.'

'That's when I stopped talking to you. (306)

This shows that narrator is very much conscious about the narration of the story. He can't befool the reader or the narrator because like the Chinese Premier is on the mission to know the truth of Bangalore, he is also on a mission to inform him of truth that exists in the city. Aravind Adiga has maintained the balance between the space and time of the narration and space and time of the narrated events. This tactics of the author has successfully led his narrator to narrate the story in the flash back without a blurred memory which made *The White Tiger* a true depiction of the truth prevailed in the society of the protagonist narrator.

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