

Narrative-within-the-Narrative: A Complex Pattern of ‘Breaking the Fourth Wall’ in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*

Akash Das

Article History: Submitted-18/07/2021, Revised-31/07/2021, Accepted-04/08/2021, Published-31/08/2021.

Abstract:

Having emerged right from the theatrical trend, the concept of ‘Fourth Wall’ implies the existence of an imaginary barrier that prevents the actors to communicate directly with the audience. Bertolt Brecht, among other modern playwrights, has practiced a reformed narrative technique that functions chiefly to ‘break the fourth wall’ and to initiate in the spectator’s psyche a process of ‘Defamiliarisation’. Its proliferation has also been witnessed across other creative genres like novel, short story, and film in the form of ‘Metafiction’. Moreover, a novel like Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, which is typically a Victorian in its essence, also offers acquaintance with a unique kind of ‘narrative-within-the-narrative’ structure implying to break the bracket of reader-character familiarity. However, its uniqueness, as well as complexity, rests in the fact that the novelist has not directed any of her narrators towards the readers. Instead, through an intermingled pattern, it develops the fourth wall confining the readers into the projected world of fiction, and simultaneously nullifies the action to alienate the readers outside the narrative framework. The paper aims to show this inherent duality that makes the narrative a significant one.

Keywords: Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Narrative Technique, Narrative-within-the-Narrative, Breaking the Fourth Wall.

Intertextuality as a literary theory had proposed that Literature is a constellation of literary texts and concepts, and no individual text derives its significance if it tries to break the conjunction and to exist in isolation. Therefore, it offers the space where the discussion of a literary work in the light of another becomes logically possible. This paper also invokes that literary tradition to dissect critically the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* and draw attention to some of its remarkable facts. Henceforth, before delving directly into the discussion at the outset, it welcomes a distant literary genre that paves the way towards a logical course of argument. And that seemingly distant literary genre is a theatrical one.

'Verfremdungseffekt' (originally a German word, which translates into English as 'Alienation effect' or 'Defamiliarisation effect') is a revolutionary theatrical concept which associates itself with the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. With his advanced theatrical notion, 'Epic-Theatre' Brecht attempted to challenge and alter the pre-existing structure of presenting a drama that was propounded earlier by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The alternative outline that the former provided through his theoretical innovation is chiefly concerned "...to leave the theatre not emotionally drained out, but intellectually stimulated..." (qtd. in Majumdar 4) Therefore, with his practical approach, Brecht did not let his audience indulge only in an empathetic association with the different personas as exhibited on the stage. Instead, he tried theatrically to impede this association and expose the audience to a situation from where they become conscious enough to judge the harsh social realities as the outsider. One of the techniques adopted by Brecht to achieve this 'alienation effect' and stimulate the audience critically is the 'breaking of the fourth wall'. A noteworthy example pertaining to this is the epilogue of his play *The Good Person of Szechwan*, where a character abruptly appears on the stage and starts addressing the audience directly:

What sort of measures you would recommend

To help good people to a happy end.

Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust:

There must be happy endings, must, must, must! (Brecht 109)

Even, William Shakespeare, much before the introduction of this modern theatrical movement, experimented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to break the fourth wall by directing Puck to address the audience:

If we shadows have offended,

Think but this, and all is mended,

That you have but slumber'd here

While these visions did appear. (Shakespeare 127)

However, he had not furnished his dramas with a realistic approach as Brecht had much later. Therefore, he did not project any consistent inclination to practice this kind of narrative pattern.

This modern form of theatrical narration does not act as a completely obscured reference as far as the narrative structure of a Victorian novel, like *Wuthering Heights* is concerned. Rather than being confined to the singularity of dimension, the idea of experimenting with the fourth wall ranges itself to other literary genres as well. The narrative composition of the 'Metafictions' like *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, and *Tristram Shandy*, among

significant others also diversify the trend of breaking the fourth wall. Having quoted Wolfgang Iser's observations in *The Act of Reading*, Kristine Ibsen says, "...although any text inevitably expresses the author's subjective view of reality, at the same time it has the potential to instigate a critical awareness in the reader and, ultimately, to induce in him or her to "react to his own 'reality' so that this same reality may be reshaped". (Ibsen 313) This critical insight also seems to build up a fundamental ground that supports the earlier reference to the reformed theatrical narrative. Certainly, Brontë did not want her readers to be as critically activated about the reality as Brecht intended his spectators to be. Moreover, the novel resides beyond the reach of the usual form of 'metafiction' that involves a sense of directness towards the readers. However, there is an underlying urge to reflect the reality that draws these referential dots together. And it is Brontë's narrative composition that actuates the readers and offers them the opportunity to witness various other issues beyond the confinements of a dark romantic world of fiction.

The narrative technique employed in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë had been offering a wide scope for healthy criticism since the old days. Yet, it is so diverse and complex in nature that the more we plunge into it, the more windows it opens to channelise our perceptions towards new dimensions. Primarily, the author has built up the structure of the 'narrative-within-the-narrative' where the story is portrayed by multiple personas and the most noted among them are Mrs. Dean and Mr. Lockwood. As Bensoussan puts it, "Lockwood's narrative is the outer framework of the novel which incorporates the intimate, eyewitness account of Nelly's story, who, in turn, relates the tertiary narratives of other characters." (Bensoussan 2) The story begins with Lockwood's arrival at Wuthering Heights to meet his landlord Mr. Heathcliff, and he continues to narrate till the Fourth Chapter, from where it becomes Nelly's concern to tell almost the entire story. Therefore, as the novel gradually progresses Nelly Dean surpasses the former narrator and emerges as the central one. Yet, this centre does not stand as an isolated one, rather, it draws other minor narrators together to give them a voice as well. And all of the 'tertiary' narrators like Catherine, Heathcliff, Isabella, Cathy (Younger Catherine), and Zillah coalesce into a collective form to ventilate their limited accounts through 'metanarratives'. In reality, this structure of 'narrative-within-the-narrative' starts developing itself much before the appearance of Nelly Dean, when in the Third Chapter Lockwood finds Catherine's diary and starts reading it during his hours of solitude: "An immediate interest kindled within me [Mr. Lockwood] for the unknown Catherine, and I began forthwith to decipher her faded hieroglyphics." (Brontë 20) And immediately, the narrative switches from Lockwood to Catherine's for a limited

span. Later this development becomes more concrete with Nelly's invitation to other 'metanarratives' throughout the novel.

While discussing the different kinds of 'dramatised narrator' (the narrator who can be identified as a distinct figure, unlike the omniscient one), having referred to *Wuthering Heights* Peter Barry says, "The 'heterodiegetic' narrator is one who is not a character in the story he or she narrates, but an outsider to it, as Mr. Lockwood is, for example... By contrast, the 'homodiegetic' narrator 'is present as a character in the story he tells.'" (Barry 235) Fundamentally, the novel embodies both 'homodiegetic' and 'heterodiegetic' narrators represented through Mrs. Dean and Mr. Lockwood, respectively. However, since Lockwood is a 'heterodiegetic' narrator, he merely acts as the mediator between the reader and Nelly's story by holding the most exterior circumference of the narrative. Here we find a noteworthy resemblance to the novel *Cristóbal Nonato* (in English, *Christopher Unborn*) written by the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, where the central figure *Cristóbal* also performs the role of an intermediary between other narrators and the text. As Ibsen places it, "Traditionally, the narrator, like the author, knows the outcome of the story before the reader has opened the book. *Cristóbal*, in contrast, acts not only as narrator...but also as reader, because he progresses through the text in the present tense, as does the reader, assembling the past as narrated to him through his parents." (Ibsen 314) Likewise, with Nelly's appearance, Lockwood transcends his former role of a narrator and takes refuge in the world of the reader. This observation becomes more pertinent when Lockwood and Nelly stand in contrast. When the latter eventually establishes herself as heavily as an omniscient narrator with her retrospection, the former, in a way, revisits an already evolved story by sharing Nelly's vision.

The 'narrative-within-the-narrative' structure not only projects multiple narrators and their perspectives, but with its dynamism, it leads to the formation of a 'realm-within-the-realm', like that of a labyrinth. When a reader with all his perceptions and aptitude begins to read a literary piece, he is pushed outside the realm of the text, owing to the unfamiliar occurrences surpassing his anticipation. This sense of unfamiliarity allows him to look at the text from every dimension possible. Lockwood, with his narrative, initially appears to be fully aware of the succeeding events of his story, as in the first chapter of the novel he begins, "1801 – I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country!" (Brontë 5) This beginning with a conscious sense of immediacy ordains an imaginary wall and pushes the reader to look at it only from an allowed distance. However, when Lockwood visits *Wuthering Heights* during a

storm-inflicted night, the situation turns out to be much altered. His confounded experiences in a mysterious and ghostly ambience gradually make him unbound his grip as a narrator. And the first blow that he receives as a narrator comes directly from Catherine's diary that seizes Lockwood's voice for a few pages. Finally, when he reveals the inclination to know the past concerning *Wuthering Heights* and its inhabitants, somehow Lockwood submits his position to Nelly: "Well, Mrs. Dean, it will be a charitable deed to tell me something of my neighbour: ...be good enough to sit and chat an hour." (Brontë 33) Forthwith, the common feeling of ignorance about the past of the characters and the mysterious setting occupies the reader as intensely as the former narrator. This allows the readers to a subconscious act of intrusion into the fictional realm by dispelling the exterior sphere of the narrative held by Lockwood. And this intrusion ultimately leads the reader to the exploration of a labyrinth of realms inside.

Though Nelly emerges as the most prominent narrative voice, she herself belongs to the narrative realm of Lockwood and in turn, develops another broader realm accommodating other metanarratives. And the first evidence of that shift towards other perspectives within Nelly's voice occurs with Heathcliff's account of his and Catherine's first visit to Thrushcross Grange as soon as Nelly starts interrogating him, "What in the world led you wandering to Thrushcross Grange?" (Brontë 44) When Heathcliff starts explaining the occurrences experienced by him, ironically, Nelly moves towards an interim obliteration of her own narrative position and appears as a passive one. This provides the reader another opportunity to advance one more step and become the active listener to Heathcliff's 'story-within-a-story' like both Nelly and Lockwood. Through Nelly's story, Brontë has woven a web of fragmented perspectives, and when Nelly's voice switches to a pause those perspectives receive considerable focus. This involves the reader in a subconscious act of exploration of the psychological operation of the principal figures through their own aspects and this eventually initiates the process of association. The sense of attachment becomes more intensified during the incidents engaging absolute psychological crisis. One such scene that threatens the consciousness and invites the subconscious to discard the narrative hindrances and to sympathise with Heathcliff's emotional profundity is when he says,

Being alone, and conscious two yards of loose earth was the sole barrier between us, I said to myself –

"I'll have her in my arms again! If she be cold, I'll think it is this north wind that chills me; and if she be motionless, it is sleep". (Brontë 257)

This builds up a bracket confining the reader and the character so sharply that the story becomes self-expressive without interference from any of the central narrators.

During the 20th century, the theatre experienced a transgression when the playwrights attempted to reverse the existing trend of maintaining the 'fourth wall' between the audience and the characters. The 'fourth wall' is like a semipermeable membrane which through a process of osmosis draws the spectators within the periphery of fiction. While discussing the process of 'Ego Identification' through theatre and its subsequent disruption by breaking the fourth wall, Stichter has referred to Boal's comment on the Aristotelian structure, "from the moment the performance begins, a relationship is established between the character... and the spectator..." (qtd. in Stichter 3) And, this established relationship had been maintained almost thoroughly until Bertolt Brecht along with other major exponents attempted to break the connection by "keeping [the] narrator visible on the stage, telling everything detachedly and the audience to listen to it with the same detachment." (qtd. in Majumdar 5) In *Wuthering Heights*, however, Brontë's arrangements do not function to break the familiarity with a sense of directness. Rather, through an improved dynamism, it implies the permission to build up a chain of association through the multi-layered narrative; and almost unexpectedly, it breaks that apart to alienate the readers outside the circle. And the continuation of the simultaneous 'do', 'undo', and 'redo' process makes the narrative set up an impressive, as well as, complex one.

Gérard Genette "...from the point of view of temporal position" has categorised four types of narrative:

Subsequent (the classical position of the past-tense narrative, undoubtedly far and away the most frequent); prior (predictive narrative generally in the future tense, but not prohibited from being conjugated in the present...); simultaneous (narrative in the present contemporaneous with the action); and interpolated (between the moments of the action) (Genette 217)

Interestingly, *Wuthering Heights* portrays multiple kinds of narrative to create an amalgamation, rather than following a linear pattern. Among the principal narrators, Mrs. Dean, with her retrospective vision, articulates the past and emerges as an embodiment of the 'subsequent' narrative. While Lockwood's 'simultaneous' narrative induces a sense of immediacy and serves to visit the present. It has been previously discussed that the shift from Lockwood to Mrs. Dean gradually activates the process of familiarisation among the readers. Likewise, an abrupt reversal of the process results in 'alienation' or 'defamiliarisation'. This inversion also functions in two ways: firstly, a switch from metanarratives to the central

voice, and secondly, from the ‘subsequent’ to the ‘simultaneous’ narrative. This argument can be validated through an instance when Cathy with minute depiction records a confession about her secret visits to Wuthering Heights. However, no sooner has she started to tell Nelly about her encounter with Hareton than Nelly cuts the flow:

‘Stop, Miss Catherine, dear!’ – I interrupted. ‘I shall not scold, but I don’t like your conduct there. If you had remembered that Hareton was your cousin as much as Master Heathcliff, you would have felt how improper it was to behave in that way...’ (Brontë 222)

Here, Nelly’s voice is not directed to address the readers. Yet, the sudden obstruction discontinuing the process of osmosis unveils the concerning issues like class discrimination. Another segment substantiates the argument where the change of narrative voice causes the change of its temporal flow. Nelly with her prevalent ‘subsequent’ narrative has almost muted the continuity of present voiced by Lockwood. However, as this prolonged account comes to an interval or conclusion, the readers are driven outside the fictional realm with Lockwood’s reclaim of his narrative position. This is evident when during an interval of the story Lockwood recuperates his voice:

Thus ended Mrs. Dean’s story. Notwithstanding the doctor’s prophecy, I am rapidly recovering strength; and though it be only the second week in January, I propose getting out on horseback in a day or two, and riding over to Wuthering Heights, to inform my landlord that I shall spend the next six months in London; (Brontë 265)

This strikes the readers and awakens them with the fact that they have been reading a piece of fiction.

Wuthering Heights is usually justified as a gothic novel not only for some incorporeal appearances but mostly because of the prevailing sense of darker mystery that penetrates into the setting as well as into characterisation. And, perhaps, to achieve the desired excellence in inducing the darker mystery, Brontë has designed a labyrinth of narrative that does not provide a stable dimension to situate the readers. It allows them to wander and explore that mysterious space as freely as a character. Yet, on the other hand, it also breaks that feeling of familiarity too unexpectedly to make them merely outsiders. And, with this ultimate retention of the unfamiliarity, the novel successfully sustains the sense of mystery; and the dark psychological aspects of the protagonist, Heathcliff remain to be discovered. While addressing the reliability of the narrators, Abigail Taylor admits that “...if Emily Brontë were interested in providing Heathcliff and Catherine’s story to the readers, she wouldn’t have

chosen to filter it through two complicated narrators.” (Taylor 5) And the story would have emerged merely as a reminiscence by Heathcliff.

If certain sections have been extracted from the novel and placed for analysis, it becomes almost difficult to certify whether the novel follows any prominent pattern to break the fourth wall. However, a vivid journey through the lines helps to explore the complexity involved in the form of the 'narrative-within-the-narrative'. In truth, there are obvious differences between the narrative structure followed by Brecht and the 'metafictions', and those employed by Brontë. Even the purpose of the paper is never to make a comparative analysis between them. Instead, it has tried to throw light on some inherent and less noticed quality of the narrative that somehow bridges all these literary references together.

Works Cited:

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 4th ed., New Delhi, Viva Books, 2018.
- Bensoussan, Natacha. “The Narrative Structure of *Wuthering Heights*: An Examination of Nelly Dean and Lockwood.” *Ellipsis*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1-6.
- Brecht, Bertolt, and John Willett. *The Good Person of Szechwan*. London, Methuen, 1965.
- Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. New Delhi, Fingerprint Classics, 2019.
- Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Ibsen, Kristine. “Narrative Perspective and the Role of the Reader in Fuentes's *Cristobal Nonato*.” *Romance Notes*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1993, pp. 313-317.
- Majumdar, Smita. “Bertolt Brecht's Concept of 'Epic-drama' and Alienation Theory and 'Tamasha Art' in Marathi Theatre: A Comparative Study.” *Lapis Lazuli*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-13.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Edited by Harold F. Brooks, New Delhi, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013.

Stichter, Anne C. "The Role of Breaking the Fourth Wall in Audience Ego Identification."

Aletheia, vol. 1, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1-15.

Taylor, Abigail. *The Housekeeper's Story: Nelly Dean as the Protagonist of Wuthering*

Heights. 2020. Texas State University, MA dissertation.

[https://digital.library.txstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10877/9891/TAYLOR-THESIS-](https://digital.library.txstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10877/9891/TAYLOR-THESIS-2020.pdf?sequence=1)

[2020.pdf?sequence=1](https://digital.library.txstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10877/9891/TAYLOR-THESIS-2020.pdf?sequence=1)