

## Self as Narrative in *The Narrator: A Novel*: A Narratological Perspective

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*The Narrator: A Novel* is a mishmash of several stories woven together and presented to us from view-point of several writer-narrators or character- narrators. The narrative opens with a horrifying, strange and magical phenomenon in which the principal narrator of the story, Rahul witnesses an emanation from his mouth that gradually takes a human shape. The ghostly figure calls himself Badrinath Dhanda who wants to write a story for a film but cannot because he is uneducated. He has come to meet him (Rahul Pattwardhan, a lecturer of English at Asafia University) to write his story for him. With obvious hesitation as Rahul who possess more complex schizophrenic desire to write a novel (creative schizophrenia whom he deliberately attribute to his more darker and libidinal alter ego Baddy) but like Badri is unable to do so for a different reason- belief in literalism and disciplined truth- agrees to compose for him. In the course of the narration of a typical Bollywoodian script of *Manpasand*, Rahul (to the readers) and Badri (to Rahul) tell their autobiographies- their birth, upbringing, education, profession, libidinal pursuits, most often foregrounding their sexualities. The narrative of *The Narrators* is multilayered. Paranjape focuses on no single character. Rather, all the characters turn into participant narrators with a view to revise their (mis) representation in the story. The story of the novel can be divided into three main threads:

- The first is the story of Rahul Pattwardhan, a young lecturer at Asafia University Hyderabad who is suffering from creative schizophrenia since his childhood and, in the process has given birth to his libidinal alter ego, Baddy-the progenitor of all his 'sexploits' and early creativity.
- The second is the interwoven story of Badrinath Dhanda, a ghost-figure who comes out of/after a magical phenemenon of emanation Rahul undergoes and finally diaappears leaving the characers and readers baffled. Badri's life story, in a way an autobiography, is full of filthy aspect (*Vibhatsa*) of sexuality.
- The final thread is that of the movie script, *Manpasand*. It was for this that Badri came to/emanated before Rahul and disappears into the middle of the story burdening Rahul to finish the script alone. It has a self-dependent rich woman Tara as the heroine who wants to find a good match for herself. She appoints a private detective Vilas to lok into the lives of her suitors but finds herself into a great trouble amidst the mafias. Finally, this is Vilas who comes to her rescue after which she marries to him. This melodramatic story contains all the movie massala of Bollywood. Furthermore, this is the most interesting and technical section of the novel in which Tara complicates the issues of narrative representation with her journey from 'reel' life to 'real' life of her creator Badri.

Critics might dub the novel pornographic declaring that the prurient will enjoy this novel better--there's sex all around, in all its variations of softness and crudity--straight, hetero, incest, sodomy, mental adultery, extramarital relationships, child abuse, voluptuousness and pure love alike. I too agree that the readers' encounter with the text will be a highly charged one in which scenes after scenes revel in the excess of eroticism or sexual aberrations. However, this is not merely an erotic or romantic novel dealing with sex of which much is fairly explicit. Paranjape deliberately tries to make the story erotic and he has a purpose in his mind. Therefore to ignore and debunk the novel only on the ground that it contains unnecessary and obsessive sexual explicitness would be fallacious as it would deny the writer and the work the literary recognition and achievement it deserves. The novelist is self-conscious of his pornographic project and its consequences. He sees these 'sexual aberrations' very natural but finds them repressed, forbidden and conflicting with the bourgeoisie 'censor' that is pushing them back in unconscious as these do not fit in society's standards of morality and propriety. The novel can be seen as a liberator of libidinal fantasies and "vile bodies". And, of course, its effort is to include all variations on the matter of sex, a subject of much modern hilarity and hatred, has a very serious sub-text that is pre-consciously realized by many modern men and women. Paranjape makes his point very clear when the readers find Badri proclaiming:

...Sex is one area in which the modern man is most confused and complexed. That's because sex offers the easiest escape from the painful confines of the self...we keep wishing to prolong it, to hold on to it, to get it for ever. We think that somehow our formula's failed; otherwise we'd have reached that pinnacle of the experience...This other side to sex, the selfish, violent, irrational, and painful side, is brought out into the open here. Some people are likely to wonder why not a single sexual encounter here is beautiful, elevating, happy. Well, why should it be that way? The rest of the world is busy glorifying and mystifying sex; why should it bother anybody if the uglier, but perhaps more real, side of sex is also exposed now and then, not in some social welfare report, but in fiction? (*The Narrators: A Novel*: 1995:254)

Paranjape, just like Freud, seems to believe that the creativity wells up from unconscious drives (id which is the repository of repressed sexual and other unwanted libidinal desires) which are always conflict with social standards of morality (superego). The artist (ego) has special power to negotiate these insatiable demands of id and censoring dynamics of super-ego. This model of id, superego and ego will be very useful to resolve the conflict of the identity of the narrators. Rahul is an artist who is caught between the incessant sexual drives of Baddy and the morally constraining, tutored nature of his goody. The conflict between Baddy(id) and Goody(superego) is so destructive that Rahul has developed schizophrenia. And, here emanates Badri (ego of the artist) who allows the artist Rahul to overcome the conflict and repressions. Badri, similar to the functioning of ego, manages to mediate the transgressive demands of Baddy and the limits imposed by goody. The script *Manpasand* he narrates to Rahul which is finished by Rahul, in a way, shows the special ability of the artist to shift the original libidinal drives from their sexual orientations to non-sexual higher goal (a movie script). The result is a 'fantasied wish-

fulfillment' for the artist Rahul and a mode that releases the tensions of his schizophrenic self opening "the way back to reality", to his wife and the baby.

But there is a subtle difference in the method of the libidinal release. Whereas in Freudian terminology, the artist uses the mechanisms of condensation, displacement, and symbolism to manifest the latent content in the manner acceptable to conscious mind (of the author and the reader), Paranjape prefers to Deleuze and Félix Guattarian model of the release of the libidinal energy. He also critiques Freudianism and re-eroticises the latent sexual desires of his narrator Rahul—all flows pass through freely, with no stopping, and no directing. He does not think sublimation or purging off the bodily desires necessary to cure schizophrenia of the narrator Rahul. Contrary to the neuroticising process of psychoanalysis, Paranjape re-eroticises Rahul freeing him for his libidinal pursuits in opposition to the repressive regimes of the scious which territorialise and control individual sexual desires from being allowed their freedom. Instead, he unchannels and 'deterritorialises' Rahul's desires to produce 'a body without organ' (the existense of Baddy and up to many extent Badri make the point more clear and stronger). following Deleuze and Félix Guattarian model of the schizoanalysis, Paranjape construes a fragmented, liberated, libidinal body of Rahul which casts of its socially regulated and subjectified circumstances of the existence. I would argue that despite the destructiveness of the mental illness, the schizophrenic condition of the narrator does provide a model for liberation from the restrictive binaries of goody and baddy. Here schizophrenia need not be taken as an illness but creatively positive mode of writing that gives an advantage to the writer/narrator otherwise limited, miserable and boring. Here schizophrenia means what Brian Massumi, in *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, summarizes as:

The "schizophrenia" that Deleuze and Guattari embrace is not a pathological condition. For them, the clinical schizophrenic's debilitating detachment from the world is a quelled attempt to engage it in imaginative ways. Schizophrenia as a positive process is inventive connection, *expansion rather than withdrawal (italics mine)*. Its twoness is a relay to a multiplicity. From one to another (and another...).... Not aimlessly. Experimentally. The relay in ideas is only effectively expansive if at every step it is also a relay away from ideas into action. Schizophrenia is the enlargement of life's limits through the pragmatic proliferation of concepts."

*Expansion* of Rahul into Baddy, Goody and Badri allows the greater limits of freedom to express himself, to create. Schizophrenia here becomes a rhetorical trope to write a fiction helping the narrator to become a writer by the end of the narrative.

### **The 'Funhouse' of Narration:**

In the process of telling the stories, the narrators of the novel, Rahul and Badri, examine and comment on the art of fiction writing, among other things, and seem to undermine the conventional and predictable nature of fiction. In the novel, Paranjape presents a narratological "funhouse," a dense maze that weaves in and out of plot, narration, and a self-conscious attention to the process of writing itself.

Telling a story is, for Paranjape, is highly self-conscious act. How to tell a story is as important as what to tell. How to write their stories is an unbearable anguish that both the two most important narrators, Rahul and Badri, suffer from in the novel. The untold stories within them are found, to the readers, splitting and killing their selves, most importantly in the case of Rahul. The schizophrenic split of Rahul selves into Baddy is the heightening of Rahul's frustrated aspirations to be a writer. Rahul has been aspiring to write a novel which is "intelligent in form, self-consciousness in technique....in a word, a novel born of jouissance, informed with jouissance, an image of jouissance(The Narrator:6-7)" but fails to write such a novel due to the limitations of his goody-goody, unlying nature (make up) and addiction for literalism. Similar to Rahul but unlike him, Badri's difficulty of writing his story is accentuated by his ignorance regarding the craft of fiction. Badri had not received any formal training in literature and knows nothing of modes and methods of story-telling. Rahul cannot write because he is too moral and literal while Badri also cannot write for want of sophistication and refinement of language. But once these two meet, the story *Manpasand* germinates which combines former's crafting art and latter's untempered imagination.

Self-conscious narrators of the novel frequently comment and call into question their own narratives to readers on what is happening in their stories while they are in the process of telling their tales. From the very beginning, Rahul self-reflexively comments on what kind of fiction he desires to create. He says:

If I were to write a novel, it wouldn't be one of those precious, ponderous, and profound tones in which nothing happens, the reading of which is an imposition, an onerous duty performed reluctantly, if diligently....Nor do I want to write a story which has lots of action, plenty of suspense, brilliant plotting, and, no doubt, an unexpected conclusion...but flat characters, pedestrian style, and no thematic value....the novel I want to write is intelligent in form, self-conscious in technique. It entertains without being superficial, moves without being boring and priggish....Innovative, even brash in telling....it wears a tint of the erotic....in a novel born of jouissance, informed with jouissance, an image of jouissance. A very desiree of a novel (6).

As we can see from this quotation, Rahul/ Paranjape formulates voices his ideas on the nature of the creative process in literature. He is modest in his ambitions and wholly conscious of the kind of fiction he is writing- with a tint of eroticism, flat characters, pedestrian style, and no thematic value, innovative, even brash in telling. On the part of the narrator/narrators, such a self-conscious 'meditation' on the methodology of the fiction-writing which investigates a theory of fiction through their practice of writing fiction formulates a 'dialogue on novel'. This is where

we inevitably come to think about the term *metafiction* that is “given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh:2)”. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” Metafictionality of *The Narrator* also stems from the fact that it strives to produce a new anti-novel kind of fiction which constantly displays the process of its own construction in the process of exploring the problematic relationship between fiction and reality. The peak of this metafictional self-reflexivity can be well discerned if one analyzes some final sections of the last part of the novel in which Rahul and Badri alternatively comment on the script of the movie *Manpasand*. Badri has his grouses against the ending of the novel and does not approve of the ‘straight’ end Rahul has given to the story. Instead he has his own alternate ‘gay’ version for the other half of the movie proposing the multiple endings for the novel. Calling into question the story Rahul has narrated to the readers, Badri charges Rahul for exploiting and malhandling him and his characters. He angrily remarks:

For starters, I think he should realize that the favourite shrine of Punjabis is Vaishno Devi, not Badrinath. He should have called me Devi Prasad Dhanda or some name like that. Then there is this problem of my parents dying on their way back from the shrine: that’s too cruel and is bound to offend the sentiment of the believers. My being abused by my uncle and cousin, too, might be unpalatable to many readers. They don’t think these things happen. My turning homosexual, though perfectly logical following my broken childhood and unsuccessful heterosexual relationships, is sure to disturb some readers...what may bother some people even more is my sudden disappearance...Badri appears from nowhere and disappears ....Throughout multiple interpretations are possible. Badri never existed; or both Badri and Baddy are the same person; or both Badri and Baddy exist but cancel each other...if I were to write my own story, I would have offered a more dramatic way of disposing of myself (*The Narrator*: 263).

Once again such intellectual self-consciousness and digressive contemplation on the part of the narrator, Badri, disturbs the rhythm of the story forcing the reader to dissociate himself from the ‘fictive’ story.

The juggling act between author, narrator, character, and reader becomes one of the fantastic performance of which the readers become a participant in the novel. Like a professional juggler, Paranjape leaves his readers extremely baffled and entertained with a bunch of "questions" regarding the narrators of the story and their relationship with the author and the readers. Paranjape has chosen to let several narrators tell their story and the story of the story from different points of view. Then he leaves it up to the reader to decide which narrator seems most reliable to him for the interpretation of the story. Further, like William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* in which Faulkner narrates the story from the first person view of multiple characters, Paranjape allows the narrators to present their story from first-person point of view bringing greater emphasis on the feelings, opinions, and perceptions of a particular character in a story, and on

how the character views the world and the views of other characters. Moresoever, as in *As I Lay Dying* wherein each chapter is devoted to the voice of a single character after whom it is titled, Paranjape also fashions his story in similar manner wherein narrators alternate their voices to tell their story and later comment on and revise it. Some final sections are also named after the narrators of the novel. Unreliability of both the narrators complicates the narratological issue of the novel. Unreliability of both the narrators wells up from two major difficulties of the reader-First, the writer has always kept the readers in confusion regarding the identity of the narrators. The identity of Badri is most susceptible as the readers are not in a position to decide whether he was a real person that exists or a hallucinatory figure that emanated on account of Rahul's schizophrenia and his dissociative split of the self into his other, Baddy. If Baddy is real wherefrom he came and whereto and why, all of sudden in the middle of the story, disappeared. He is delusionary as he says, "I am Badrinath Dhanda, alias Baddy, am the only true hero in this novel (278)" then how come he stays with Rahul as a living entity and more importantly, sends a letter to Rahul containing a cheque of Rs. 100001 and Blessings for forthcoming baby Patwardhan. The readers are always perturbed at this irritating reliability of Badri. In addition, Rahul is also schizophrenic and his account, too, can never be taken for granted. Second, both the narrators *cancel/suspend* each others story revealing that the other narrator has manipulated or fabricated the preceeding story, thus forcing the reader to question their prior assumptions about the text. In this case the narrators' unreliability is never fully revealed but only hinted at, leaving the reader to wonder which of the narrator should be trusted and how the story should be interpreted. Such a tricky and manipulative manner of story-telling is further enhanced by the fact that the characters within the novel are found interrogating their creators. Rahul has suggestions for the original author of the story. He wants to make it more polyphonic, dialogic, open ended and mutivocal. He wants the original writer to rewrite and revise his characters. He says:

Will the real author of this book please stand up? I have a couple of suggestions to make to him. For instance, wouldn't it be a good idea to start a feedback column inside a novel?...What I have in mind, instead, is for the characters in the story to get back at the author....So, I, Rahul Patwardhan, lecturer in English at Asafia University, Hyderabad, the husband of Neha, the friend of Badrinath Dhanda, and the "other" of Baddy, would like a chance at rewriting my own character (246-7).

Further, Badri, too, is unhappy with his creator Rahul. Tara also transgresses the limits of narrative convention walking out of the movie script into the real life of his creator, Badri. Paranjape's use of these techniques is aimed at creating an unsettling and irrational aura for the reader in which the end result is a reader's participatory encounter with the text and he/she gathers the narrator's observations as well as the information presented by the text, and selectively makes what they will make meaning out of the text.

The other noteworthy feature of the novel's narratology is the choice of rare narratorial point of view. The point of view chosen by the novelist to narrate the events can be seen as an instance of *variable focalisation* (following Genette) as the different episodes of the story are told to us

through two main focalisers, Rahul and Badri. The narrators are both homodiegetic (when they are telling their own stories) and heterodiegetic (when they are writing the script of the movie *Manpasand*). While reviewing of the novel, Nitin *Jarandikar* writes of three narrative levels (borrowing from Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*) present in the story- extradiegetic level (outside the text.), intradiegetic level (inside the text) and metadiegetic level (stories told by a character inside a story). Dividing the story into these three major narrative levels, he remarks:

- i. Extradiegetic level: Where Rahul Patwardhan narrates his personal experiences, his meetings with Badri, and the working out of the script, "Manpasand"
- ii. Intradiegetic level: where Badri Dhanda narrates his personal experiences to Rahul Patwardhan and to the real readers.
- iii. Metadiegetic levels: where the screenplay 'Manpasand' is unfolded to the real readers.

But to read the novel entirely on the model of available western theories, especially postmodern, would be partial. Without going into specifics, I will safely claim that the narrative appears to have a close affinity with the tradition of story-telling in India. In fact, the narrators have their own argument for calling a story born out of Indian tradition of story-telling. Badri, in this regard, comments:

If I were educated and knowledgeable like Rahul, I would immediately understand that this book belongs, at least, to the venerable tradition of Indian story telling. The Indian story is never a straightforward narrative, marching tidily from the very beginning, through the middle, to the end. Rather, it is like a labyrinth or the whorls of a flower. It is multilayered and multilinear. Indian stories are very conscious of their narrativity.... Once the pretext has been established, the narrative proceeds through multiple narrators, point of view, stories within stories, flashbacks, digressions, philosophical disquisitions, minor treatises on architecture, painting, music, dance, drama, archery, equitation and so on...." (274-5).

True to Badri's claims the narrative of the novel is also part of the continuing great tradition of story-telling in India. The whole novel consists of a series of interlinked but interpolated stories stretching and with breathless virtuosity, the narratives propel the reader to the lives of Rahul and Badri alternatively. The narrative consists of multiple narrators, stories within stories, digressions and multiple endings.

In brief, the narratology of the novel *The Narrator: A Novel* distinguishes it from the rest of the Indian novels written in English. The novel tends to be experimental, and breaks away with the conventional methods of story-telling used in Indian English Fiction. Through out the narrative, the readers notice that there is little attempt to create an illusion of realism or naturalism. It establishes its own conventions of narratology, a kind of anti-realist deterring the reader from identification with the characters, yet at the same time persuading him to participate. Some obvious features of the narrative include lack of an obvious plot; diffused episode; minimal

development of character; self-reflexivity; polyphony; innumerable experiments with language (vocabulary and syntax), punctuation; alternative endings and multiplicity of the narrators.

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