

Dialoguing the Text: Self-Reflexive Elements in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*

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Abstract: John Barth, one of the greatest exponents of postmodern fiction, makes explicit use of metafictional and self-reflexive elements in his work *Lost in the Funhouse*. Keeping in tune with his own declarations in his two remarkable essays "Literature of Exhaustion" and "Literature of Replenishment" Barth experiments with a new postmodern mode of narrative in all the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse*. The narrators of these stories do not merely tell stories but reflect on them and provide the readers with a detailed account of the thought processes involved in the creation of the stories. In other words, Barth's narrative is all about "stories-within-stories. Called as "metafiction" in typical Postmodernist terms, such a narrative makes us aware of the 'fictionality of fiction'—a tenet that is rampantly traced in many postmodern novels. Needless to say, self-reflexive and metafictional modes of narrative involve a straightforward dialogue between the author and the reader in a scenario where the author becomes a character in the story and duly shares his creative experiences with the reader. In the light of the above theoretical inputs, this paper intends to read John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* as a representative postmodern text while highlighting the metafictional and self-reflexive elements in the text.

Key Words: Self-reflexivity, metafiction, postmodernism, dialogism

John Barth is one of the most important writers of postmodernity. He has not only written a few defining and explicative postmodern novels, but also theorized the nature and traits of postmodern narratives in clear and precise terms. In his two remarkable essays "Literature of Exhaustion" and "Literature of Replenishment," John Barth discusses the 'used-up-ness' of the existing literature and suggests that the exhaustion of the existing literature should augur a new kind of writing—experimental, self-reflexive and metafictional. Talking about his essay "Literature of Exhaustion," in retrospect, in his latter one "Literature of Replenishment" (written twelve years after the first one), John Barth, gives a clarification about his newly introduced Postmodern narrative style. He says:

The simple burden of my essay was that the forms and modes of art live in human history are therefore subject to used-upness, at least in the minds of significant numbers of artists in particular times and places; in other words, that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work. (Barth, LOR 205)

What Barth means by such a declaration is that the "aesthetics of high modernism" is "essentially [a] completed program" (Barth, LOR 205) and hence, there is an urgent need for the invention of a new and innovative technique that was to be introduced in the form of Postmodern writing. According to Brian McHale: "The emphasis fell, rather, on the possibility of artistic

conventions being 'deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work'" (26). Susana Onega rightly points out: "For Barth, the truly creative writer is one capable of giving birth to a new literary form out of the ironic absorption and rejection of the "exhausted" form preceding it" (143). This new and innovative technique is what Barth himself terms as "self-reflexivity"—a technique which involves providing the reader a probing account of the very process of the creation of the text by the author. In other words, the author takes the reader into confidence and explains to him why and how he wrote certain lines, what were the thought processes that generated those lines etc.

Keeping this in view, it can be affirmed that John Barth's novel (or the anthology of short stories) *Lost in the Funhouse* is a clear exposition of his own theory of self-reflexivity. Based on the above precepts, this article explores how Barth works out and explains to his readers his own introduced concept of self-reflexivity in his novel *Lost in the Funhouse*.

The story "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction" seems to be a glaring manifesto of self-reflexivity where the narrator talks to the reader or the audience and says: "You who listen give me life in a manner of speaking—I won't hold you responsible. My first words weren't my first words. I wish I had begun differently" (Barth, LITFH 35). Before going into this statement of the narrator, it must be understood that a prominent feature of self-reflexive mode of narrative is a straight-forward dialogue between the author and reader where we see the author frequently accosting the reader and explaining to him the very process of the creation of the text, *Italo Calvino's If*

on a *Winter's Night a Traveller* being another notable example of such a mode of narration. Coming back to the above-quoted statement of the narrator, we observe that the author calls the reader his "life-giver"—a statement that demonstrates a prominent feature of postmodern thought and philosophy where the reader is given prime emphasis over the author in a scenario where the latter does not write according to his own thinking; rather, his writing becomes a medium for the fulfillment of the expectations of the reader. In other words, the reader is the active agent leading and guiding the creative process, the author being a mere follower of his expectations, instructions and guidances. Secondly, we also get a glimpse of the creative tension in the author's mind where he says that he wished he could have begun differently. The unimportance of the author in the creative process is further ascertained when he tells the reader: "I see I see myself as a halt narrative: first person, tiresome. Pronoun sans ante or precedent, warrant or respite. Surrogate for the substantive: contentless form, interestless principle; blind eye blinking at nothing. Who am I. A little crise d'identite for you. I must compose myself" (Barth, *LITFH* 35). The statement, of course, is a reiteration of the secondary importance of the author in the creative process where he describes himself with negating epithets like "surrogate for the substantive" and "a blind eye blinking at nothing" etc.

The story "Lost in the Funhouse" arguably seems to be the most significant exposition of the theme of self-reflexivity. The narrator of the story makes it clear from the very beginning that he is going to rely on some very significant and well-accepted methods of narration. They are—firstly, "description of physical appearance and mannerisms" (Barth, *LITFH* 73), secondly, "keeping the sense operating" and thirdly, the use of metaphors, similes and other figures of speech because he believes that "A fine metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech, in addition to its obvious 'first order' relevance to the thing it describes, will be seen upon reflection to have a second order of significance . . ." (Barth, *LITFH* 74). Substantiating the first method of narration, the narrator provides the readers with a detailed account of the physical appearance of Magda, Uncle Karl, Peter and Ambrose's father. He describes Magda as possessing "very good manners" and a "figure [that] was very well developed for her age" (Barth, *LITFH* 75) whereas Uncle and Peter are found to be resembling each other in their faces. Additionally, the narrator lets us know that: "Both had dark hair and eyes, short husky statures, deep voices" (Barth, *LITFH* 75). While describing the father of Ambrose, the narrator reveals that no such special feature of Ambrose's father stood out though he "wore glasses and was principal of a T—Country grade school" (Barth, *LITFH* 75). We are also informed that "Uncle Karl was a masonry

contractor" ((Barth, *LITFH* 75). To explicate the sensory experiences (the second method as mentioned by the narrator), he makes use of visual images like "the brown hair of Ambrose's mother gleaming in the sun" and olfactory images like the "smell of uncle Karl's cigar" and the "fragrance of the ocean" (Barth, *LITFH* 74). To explicate the third method, the narrator gives the example of the description of the sea in Ulysses with unusual epithets like "snot-green" and "scrotum-tightening" (Barth, *LITFH* 74) etc. What the narrator does here is that he first lets us know how he planned his narrative through three distinct narrative methods and then, how he formed his narrative accordingly so that we, the readers, get a clear account of how the narrative was planned, formed and worked out.

It is also worth noticing at the beginning part of the story that the narrator plans the story with a beginning, a middle part and an end. He explains by saying that the beginning should describe the sequence of events relating to Ambrose's movement into the Funhouse whereas the middle part should have the "double and contradictory function of delaying the climax" (Barth, *LITFH* 74) as well as drawing the attention of the readers towards the ending. The ending, finally, should give us an account of Ambrose's activities during his disappearance and what others make of that experience. And, it can be observed that the story moves according to the plan. So far as the ending of the story is concerned, nevertheless, the narrator provides the readers with a few different endings rather than a single and fixed one so that different possible conclusions for the story can be contemplated and worked out. One such possible ending could be that Ambrose comes across a person in the dark of the funhouse and both of them struggle, against the latter (like Ulysses) to help and encourage each other. And, finally they would find a way out of the darkness of the funhouse to the light of the outside world. However, it is interesting to note that more possibilities are also offered regarding the identity of the Ambrose's companion. The narrator predicts that Ambrose's companion could be a blind girl, a negro, President Roosevelt's son, Ambrose's former archenemy etc.

In another version of the ending of the story, we came to know how Ambrose died "of starvation" in the funhouse "telling stories to himself in the dark;" how his skeleton was found in the "labyrinthine corridor" of the funhouse and was mistaken as a "part of the entertainment" (Barth, *LITFH* 95); how his every word was overheard and transcribed by the exquisitely beautiful daughter of the assistant operator of the funhouse.

Startlingly though, we find another possible ending of the story where Ambrose imagines himself to be "successful, married, at ease in the world, the trials of his adolescence far behind him" (Barth, *LITFH* 96) to be wishing to "have

never entered the funhouse” and also wishing to “construct funhouses for others” (Barth, *LITFH* 96).

The point that is made explicitly clear through the offering of these different endings of the story is that we, the readers, are provided with a clear passage to the inmost recesses of the mind of the author and explore the different thought processes and different possibilities he contemplates and encounters while trying to give a closure to his story. In other words, the author involves the reader in the creative process and urges them to consider these different possibilities. Therefore, the story becomes a clear exposition of the technique of self-reflexivity employed in the very construction of the story. Theo D’haen therefore remarks: “What all stories of *Lost in the Funhouse* have in common is that they are intensely metafictional and self-reflexive. In other words, they are not so much preoccupied with what they tell as with how they do so, and with the possibilities and impossibilities of storytelling” (34)

The narrator of the story “Title” carries forward the exploration of self-reflexivity. He explores, in a self-reflexive tone, the typical Postmodern theme of the impossibility of providing a closure to a narrative. At the beginning of the story (which the narrator calls “the story of our life”), we are informed that “three-quarters [of the story are] done, waiting for the end” (Barth, *LITFH* 105). However, as the narration proceeds we see what great difficulty the narrator confronts in providing a closure to the story. He narrates:

Plot and theme: notions vitiated by this hour of the world but as yet not successfully succeeded. Conflict, complication, no climax. The worst is to come. Everything leads to nothing: future tense; past tense; present tense. Perfect. The final question is, Can nothing be made meaningful? Isn’t that the final question? If not, the end is at hand. Literally, as it were. Can’t stand any more of this. (Barth, *LITFH* 105)

A careful reading of the above passage would readily reveal that the narration is full of conflicts and complications but no climax in a situation where everything leads to nothing. It is obviously understandable that without the climax, the narration cannot find a closure and will at the same time be struggling for a proper meaning. Finally, the author declares: “I can’t finish anything; that is my final word” (Barth, *LITFH* 107). Towards the final part of the story, we come to know that the author has not yet achieved the closure and the chapter ends only with an

anticipation of a denouement and a closure. The narrator says: “Let the *denouement* be soon and unexpected, painless if possible, quick at least, above all soon. Now now! How in the world will it ever” (Barth, *LITFH* 113). It is fascinating to note that the last sentence of the story (as quoted above) does not have a full stop at the end, symbolically suggestive of the impossibility of the closure in a story.

Commensurate with the self-reflexive nature of the above-stated stories, the “Life-Story” espouses the theme of ‘story-within-a-story’ in which the author involves us, the readers, in his creative process where he finds his own life to be a fiction. Self-reflexive analysis and explication of his own life in his fiction becomes some kind of a ‘fiction-within-a-fiction.’ Theo D’haen rightly points out: “Of course, neither in *Lost in the Funhouse* nor in *Chimera* does Barth limit himself to simple retelling; here again, it is the story of the story that takes center-stage” (35).

It must be mentioned here that Barth acknowledges in his essay “Literature of Exhaustion” that he takes his idea of ‘story-within-the-story’ from the 602nd night of *The 1001 Nights* (as done frequently by the Argentine writer George Luis Borges). He says:

Now Borges (whom someone once vexedly accused me of inventing) is interested in the 602nd Night because it’s an instance of the story-within-the-story turned back upon itself, and his interest in such instances is threefold: first, as he himself declares, they disturb us metaphysically: when the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they’re in, we’re reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence, one of Borges’ cardinal themes, as it was of Shakespeare, Calderon, Unamuno, and other folk. (Barth, *LOE* 73)

Keeping in tune with the spirit of Borges, Shakespeare, Calderon, Unamuno etc. (as mentioned by Barth in the above quotation), the narrator of “Life-Story” says, in a self-reflexive tone, that “fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity” (Barth, *LITFH* 128). Reflecting on the writing of the author, he narrates:

To what conclusion will he come? He’d been about to append to his own tale inasmuch as the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be

employed unless deliberately as a false analogy, certain things follow: 1) fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity or 2) choose to ignore the question or deny its relevance or 3) establish some other, acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader" (Barth, *LITFH* 128).

The self-reflexive findings of the writer in the "Life-Story" (as described by the narrator in the above passage) establish some extremely vital aspects of Postmodern thought and philosophy. Apart from the establishment of the fictitiousness of fiction, the conclusion of the story also questions, contests and disqualifies the old analogy between Author, God, novel and the world and establishes the invalidity or the falsity of the relation. Such a statement on the part of the narrator can be taken as an oblique hint towards Roland Barthes' concept of the "death of the author" and also the Poststructural notion that the whole world is a construct in language.

As has been frequently mentioned earlier, the self-reflexive fiction involves the active dialogue between the author and the reader; and therefore, the narrator of this story describes: "If this life was his fictional narrative it consisted of three terms—teller, tale, told—each dependant on the other two . . ." (Barth, *LITFH* 122). Moreover, highlighting the self-reflexivity of his narrative, the narrator also says: "The idea of [his] was playing with his characters' and his own self-consciousness" (Barth, *LITFH* 122). The intense involvement of the reader in a self-reflexive fiction approaches its exemplary height when, after providing a detailed account of his thought process during the narration, the author draws the attention of the reader and accosts him:

The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You have read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where is your shame? (Barth, *LITFH* 127)

The passage is an ultimate expression of the active involvement of the reader in the creative process in a self-reflexive fiction. The intimacy between the author and the reader goes onto such an extent that the former identifies himself with the latter and vice versa. The narrator describes: "1) his author was his sole and indefatigable reader; 2) he was in a sense his own author, telling his story to himself, in which case in which case; and/or 3) his reader was not only tireless and shameless but sadistic, masochistic if he was himself" (Barth, *LITFH* 127).

The chapter "Anonymiad" furthers the theme of self-reflexivity and the 'fictionality of fiction.' After imagining himself to be a participator in the famous Greek mythical stories and after rewriting those stories, the narrator comes to realise that all the events that he mistook to be real were not real, but fiction only. He therefore says: "I gloried in my isolation and seeded the waters with its get, what I came to call *fiction*. That is, I found that by pretending that things had happened which in fact had not, and that people existed who didn't, . . . Menelaus, Helen, the Trojan War" (Barth, *LITFH* 193). From these descriptions what is finally established is the fictionality of the fiction or the "constructedness" of fiction which, in typical Postmodernist terminology, is also called metafiction. Paul Maltby explains the scenario by saying: "However, 'metafiction, has a much wider compass than 'postmodernism' and is generally used to denote *any systematically self-reflexive* work of fiction, that is to say, fiction which investigates and exposes the processes of its own construction and, by implication, the codes and shifting parameters of 'literature.'" (376).

To conclude, John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* looks to be a fiction that experiments with the new methods and techniques that he himself had made explicit in his two remarkable essays: "The Literature of Exhaustion," and "The Literature of Replenishment." The new narrative methods mentioned and discussed in the above two essays are truly experimented in the novel *Lost in the Funhouse*. The narrative of this novel does not involve mere story telling; rather provides reflections on the narrative along with it. Such a self-reflexive analysis of the narrative readily informs us about the fictionality of the fiction or in other words, we come to know how the fiction is generated through a creative process. *Lost in the Funhouse* can therefore be said to be a true representative of self-reflexive fiction.

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