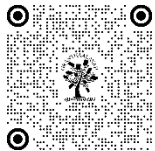


WRITING 'PRAVASI' LIVES: NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN DEEPAK UNNIKRISHNAN'S TEMPORARY PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

The emerging writer Deepak Unnikrishnan has employed various experimental techniques in his award-winning novel *Temporary People*. The aberration in narrative style and typographical violations symbolize fractured and torn apart life of the characters of the novel. The paper analyses the relevance of such narrative and typographical departures in connection with the experiences of the characters of the novel.

Keywords: Temporary People, Narrative Techniques, Magic Realism, Typographical Violation, Deformation of Pravasis and Fragmented Psyche of Guest Workers

1. INTRODUCTION

Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* is a collection of 28 incoherent or loosely linked chapters/short stories compiled into a unique fictional narrative. These 28 'chapters' (as it is spelt in the book) are divided into three parts (Limbs, Tongue and Veed) and they are marked with Arabic numerals. The novel tells the shattered stories of 'Pravasis' (gulf immigrants) in the United Arab Emirates and their fragmented lives using experimental narrative techniques. This magic realistic novel, though it has some kind of resemblance with Marques's narrative style, is written in Kafkaesque parables by mingling English, Malayalam and Arabic. Hybridism in style and narration reflects the liminal spaces of trans-cultural exchange and the identity of 'Pravasi' lives. The novel ends with the chapter (chapter) of Pravasis = (with the mathematical symbol of '='). Interestingly it is the third chapter to carry the same title Pravasi. First one of them is Pravasis, second one is Pravsis?. The third one Pravasis= does not contains even a single sentence but some cartoons of Pravasis. These are some narrative techniques used by the author to convey the fragmented existence of the temporary people as he names them in the title. The paper argues that this experimental novel is abundant with different types of narrative techniques like deliberate misspelling, use of Arabic numerals, avoiding of the linking character. These techniques will help to depict the marginality of the existence of the gulf emigrants with fragmental nature of their selves. Major narrative techniques used by the author are the following:

Using words with wrong (invented) spelling is one of the techniques. All the 28 chapters of the book have been deliberately misspelt as 'chabters' replacing the letter 'p' with the letter 'b'. This replacement makes the novel much deeper in its meaning. Perhaps this replacing technique is made possible due to the Arabs' pronunciation of English letter 'p' with the influence of Arabic alphabet 'ba'. In Arabic language there is no corresponding sound of English letter 'p'. Another possible cause of this transposition is influence of mother tongue upon English. Keralites often pronounce English alphabet 'p' as 'b' especially in 'jumping' and 'pumping'. This spelling replacement reflects the deformation of Pravasis' existence. Pravasis are 'temporary people' who have no permanent selves. Their identity always undergoes for transformation and deformation. They have been forced to change their lifestyle, food habit and costume. They are not permitted to be in their true selves.

The novel has three parts which are marked by Arabic numeral symbols. Author uses Arabic numerals instead of the most common Indo-Arabic numerals, which has been derived from the earlier. So, it should be read as the 'part (juz-ul) avval (Arabic word means first)' rather than first part. Then 'part thani' and 'part thalith' instead of second and third parts respectively. This pidgin word formation from English and Arabic may be representing the hybrid cultural amalgamation of 'temporary people' because their culture has been formed by commingling various cultures and languages.

Unlike the other popular novels, this novel does not have a particular hero or heroine. It can be called 'a novel without a hero'. Characters of one chapter seldom appear in other chapters. Each chapter has its own characters and plot. All chapters incorporate the pathetic condition of temporary people by a mixture of pathos and humour. In that sense the real hero of the novel is the titular character whose life is shattered and scattered in between different culture, landscape and language. So, the novel does not have any linking character for correlating the entire plot. This incoherency reflects the fragmented condition of gulf immigrants.

The novel has its own pattern and sentence structure. Author adds a type of structural fragmentation in order to depict broken selves of temporary people. Many sentences of the novel are either grammatically incorrect or incomplete. Some chapters include mere words without proper conjunctions, and some do not have even a single word. All the three chapters titled 'Pravasi' do not have even a single sentence, but only some nouns and adjectives. They are put in a series of words by omitting all other grammatically functioning words, which make the sentence meaningful. These chapters do not contain even a single verb too. One of the chapters does not have any word or letter but only some cartoons of 'Pravasis', which show the mechanical condition of their life. This clearly expresses the incompleteness of Pravasi and his fragmented existence.

Deepak Unnikrishnan beautifully blends the words of different languages especially words from Malayalam and Arabic. He blends Malayalam, Arabic, and English slang as well as South Asian and Persian Gulf cultures to capture the disjunction and dissociation of Pravasis. Many chapters are titled with Malayalam words. 'Veel' and 'Pravasi' are some examples. In the last part of the novel author uses Malayalam words with Malayalam fonts. He even dares to use Malayalam letters to write his own name in one occasion. This novel is written about temporary people in their own hybrid language. They have no language of their own. They belong nowhere.

Some parts of the book are nothing but fables and parables. One of the chapters is titled as *Blatella Germanica* is basically a fable. It is a story of cockroaches. The story has strong similarity with the novella *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. Here a particular cockroach called The General started to imitate human being and he learned the language of so-called temporary people. At night he practiced the language, wore human costume and tried to walk like human beings. When this was noticed by other fellow cockroaches, they immediately expelled him from their community. But later the members of his community recognized his unique skills and welcomed him for the same, though it was after a major physical assault by a boy.

One day a boy tried to kill The General with a poisonous spray. The General muttered him uncontrollably 'you bloody shut' and he fell into a crack. After his survival all other cockroaches gathered in front of him and they welcomed him back to the community with reverence. They praised The General for his communication skill, way of walking and for his costume. They wanted him to teach all these skills to the younger generation.

In this novel the author uses the technique of magic realism in a unique style. By this Deepak Unnikrishnan shows the unconventional life situation of Pravasis. Here is a strong resemblance with *One Hundred Years of Solitude* of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *Metamorphosis* of Franz Kafka. Some of the instances are as follow:

- 1) Iqbal said, "I once saw a man shrink to the size of a child. At lunchtime, he drank a tub of water and grew back to his original size."
- 2) "I knew a man" Iqbal continued, "who collected sweat. He would go door to door with a trolley full of buckets. After a week's worth, this man--Badran was his name--dug a pit near the buildings we lived in. It would take him a long time to pour the buckets of sweat into that pit. The first couple of times, I watched. Then I began to help. Soon we had a pool-a salty pool. It was good fun. We floated for hours."
- 3) "Once I sat next to a man who was so hot he evaporated before my eyes. I took his pants; someone took his shoes; his shirt was ugly, so no one wanted that." (Ch. 1).

Allegory of 'Jinn' is another technique used by author. It is believed that Jinn is a spirit who could appear in animal or human form and influence human beings. Many Arabian tales are nothing but wonderful stories about Jinn. One Thousand and One Night has many such beautiful stories. This novel has a particular chapter for Jinn as there is chapter in holy Quran titled as surah al jinn. Though the story of Jinn in the novel has some similarity with those stories it has a uniqueness in it. The following extract is taken from the novel:

This river, my mother believed, was special, something the jinns may have had a hand in making. When the nights simmered like day, she told us, when weeks went by without rain, the fish in the river would swim up to the bank on certain nights, discarding their scales, fins, tails, becoming people, walking on land like they were testing its hospitality, in case the river beds dried up and they needed a new place to live. But the fish were a bundle of nerves when they ventured out, perplexed by the ways of man: how they walk, drove cars, mined mountains, built machines, bought Gold Spot for the kids. The fish, my mother said, felt vulnerable, and they became tense.

In order to keep calm, many openly participated in the vices on offer, comfortably overeating in shaaps selling spicy beef fry. Trading stories with alcoholics who didn't want to go home just yet, drinking fresh arrack straight from the toddy tapper's pot searching for women whose men toiled abroad, searching for men whose women did the same. Near dawn, after a lot of eating or lovemaking or fucking or drinking or wandering, the fish would return to the banks, disappearing into the muddy river convinced they were river creatures, unsuited for land. (Ch. 7)

Some part of the novel is just like some stories about machines and robots. A pravasi is just considered as a robot or a machine. He or she is a machine for minting money for the well-being of others. Here the author tries to reveal the pathetic condition of 'Pravasi' who toils abroad while his or her families are enjoying their life at home. Pravasis ruin their lives for the well-being of their families. They often forgot to live their own. When they realize that they have not lived their own lives they tend to be too late to live. "I once knew a man who wanted to die," said Iqbal. "He realized pretty early it was hard to die in the workplace or in the camps. He wasn't unhappy. He just wanted to die"

Charley knew what he wanted, but he was also fair. He had a wife and kids back home he wanted to make sure were provided for. He figured the best way to do that would be to die performing some work-related tasks. That way they would be compensated:

Well, he asked me to help. I liked him, you know. I said yes. He said it would take some time, a year or two, but it could work. So, Charley tells me that every couple of months he would give himself an accident. He'd start with small ones. Fall off the first floor, lose a few toes. Then he would build up: third floor, sixth floor. Thing is, he'd tell me beforehand. A note, some secret code indicating when he planned to do this, and where. So, I'd wait for the deed, and before anyone found out I'd go to him, remove one piece of him--don't know, a finger or something then throw that into the trash bin. Stick People would fix him up at night, but there would be a part missing. He promised himself four accidents a year. If he played his cards right, in three years, he'd be properly broken, just not fixable, and the company would be bound to inform his family. So that's what we did for a while.

"His family wouldn't have gotten a cent," Anna confided.

"Let me finish," said Iqbal. "Wed done enough for me to administer the hammer blow in a few months; it had taken longer than we had anticipated-six years. One night, Charley sought me out. I want to live, he said. I didn't know what to say. I had removed a few fingers, toes, a kidney, his penis. His legs were half the size they'd been when he arrived, and now he wanted to live." (Ch. 1).

The novel also opens multiple possible interpretations. It can be read in different ways. There are many other possible interpretations. One of the chapters of the novel is quoted here. Readers are left to interpret the given text by their own.

2. CHABTER SIX

DINGOLFY

BETWEEN VENU UNCLE AND the Paki baker's niece. Both, missing.

No one's looking. Venu Uncle probably converted to Islam, is Venu Uncle no more. Maybe Venu Uncle now goes by Ismail or Ahmad or Bilal. I hope they cut his pecker, that it wouldn't stop bleeding. I hope that's how Ismail and Ahmad and Bilal died. (Ch. 6)

In short Deepak Unnikrishnan's Temporary People is a novel-in-stories which uses different narrative techniques in order to illustrate the fragmented deformation of guest workers in gulf countries. It starts with narrating a series of metamorphoses. In this novel, guest workers dissolve into passports, and a sultan harvests a fresh crop of laborers. Elsewhere a man has grown a suitcase for a face, while a teenager's tongue has fled his body, verbs soon spilling out and assuming forms of their own. All this surreal shape-shifting patches together a mosaic of the frenetic, fantastical and fragmented lives of the South Asian Diaspora in the United Arab Emirates.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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