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Critiquing the Multiple Trajectories of Sign as an Individual in Italo Calvino's story "A Sign in Space"

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Abstract

Are we living in real world? Is this a copy of original world? Where is the original? Various explanations have been proposed by theorists regarding it. This paper intends to address the boundaries of human existence in present day world. The story "A Sign in Space" revolves around that sign which was created by the protagonist. The first half of the paper introduces about a sign and various interpretations regarding its origin. The second half explores the nature of sign and its relevance in the contemporary society. The last part of the paper focuses on the confusion and dilemma due to the illusionary nature of sign and its relevance in the social world. With the changing ways of society the nature of our culture is also changing as nothing is permanent resultant everything has to undergo a change with the passage of time.

Moreover the identity of an individual is dynamic in nature like a sign which is created by protagonist in the space as mentioned in story. After some time when he tries to search for his sign again which he has created in the past but unfortunately he did not find the same sign and the sign which he found made him more confused regarding its authenticity of its creation.

Thus, it is difficult to predict the original nature of existing substance as no one is sure about the original nature of sign which we are following conventionally or blindly without introspecting it. In this way the author of the story has tried to break from the age old conventions and stereotypes. Through this piece of writing the author has projected the picture of present day civilization which laid to deep introspection on the present day dilemmas and confusion in the society as fear of insecurities, feeling of isolation, lack of contentment and satisfaction among the people.

Key words- sign, dilemma, stereotypes, convention, illusionary, authentic.

Introduction:

In the story the protagonist named Qfwfq drew a sign in space with a motive to find it again after two hundred million years. It was the first sign created by him from an idea came to his mind. But after two hundred million of years when he tried to search his same sign but he failed to find it. Later on he found many signs in the space which were somehow different in nature. The narrator in the story is trying to explore how time has its effect on things/signs as nothing is definite and permanent in nature thus, signs are getting meaning with the existing values and culture. Thus, the protagonist although created the sign in space but he himself was not sure about his sign, whether it was his original sign or copy of some pre-existing sign. Thus, this dilemma creates omnipotence confusion which somehow reflects that some situations are not in the hands of narrator and further this confusion leads to ambiguity regarding the clarity of situation. He described regarding the existence of the sign as:

I drew a sign at a point in space, just so I could find it again two hundred million years later, when we went by the next time around. What sort of sign? It's hard to explain because if I say to you, you immediately think of a something that can be distinguished from a something else, but nothing could be distinguished from anything there; you immediately think of a sign made with some implement or with your hands, and then when you take the implement or your hands away, the sign remains . . . there were no implements . . . all things that came along afterwards, a long time afterwards. (Calvino 15)

Hence, by considering it as the first sign in the universe of the Milky Way with a motif to recognize the same sign but he did not distinguish it from other signs, "Recognizable, yes, beyond any possibility of error, because all the other point in space were the same, indistinguishable, and instead, this one had the sign on it" (Calvino 16). So, the whole process explicitly hints that Italo Calvino's attempt of applying interdisciplinary approach by combining the field of literary theory with the application of scientific principles. Basically, Calvino tries to trace the journey of quest for identity in postmodern world. A Sign in Space is one of the twelve stories of volume *Cosmicomics* in which Calvino's sole purpose is of projection of identities which are gradually changing in nature with time and space:

Calvino's *Cosmicomics* may be seen as an enactment of postmodernism's paradoxical awareness and nostalgia. Accordingly, Qfwfq's autobiography vacillates between his desires for change, the textuality of experience (differentiation) and his desire for no change whatsoever, a return to the pre-symbolic (entropy). Qfwfq's desire for mastery to achieve recognition and to stabilize his version of self – motivates both his desire for differentiation and entropy. (Seigel 46).

Thus, Calvino through the projection of fictional character Qfwfq presented the dilemma and confusion of the postmodern age. Through his mouthpiece Qfwfq Calvino demonstrates the individual's desire for identification and acceptance in postmodern world. Further Qfwfq also depicts the void, loss and absence of real identity in the process of formation of language. "with this very first sign, Qfwfq's identity and consciousness

are caught up in the web of language. Qfwfg cannot turn back- the loss of his sign threatens the loss of his identity and existence” (Siegel 46-47). Qfwfg’s motive is to discard multiple copies of signs which would be the source of nostalgia and acts as an important attributes of postmodernism and quest for an ultimate origin. Ferdinand De Saussure in his book called *Course in General Linguistics* analysis all cultural phenomena and concepts in the structure of language. Accordingly, “signs are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relationship with other terms of the system”(46). Saussure analyzed that sign is constituted by a word (signifier) and its meaning (signified) in particular context. The very notion of a sign has meaning when we register certain difference and make sense of them in difference just as protagonist in the story when he failed to find his sign but he found another sign of different nature. Likewise the concept of culture in broader sense is complex term which constitutes different signs that have relevance and generate meaning in certain context. This means that words (signifier) do not refer to reality but to other words from which they are different in nature. Therefore the meaning of a sign exists only in relationship and difference with other signs. The meaning of a sign is not determined by the relation between signifier and signified but rather the place of that sign within larger network system of other signs.

The other theorist Jacques Derrida starts with Saussure’s definition of sign as meaning of sign does not exist in difference with other signs but meaning is present in ‘absent’ form. Derrida explains that it is center which holds structure and that delimits the possible play in the structure but simultaneously keeps itself separate from the whole process like the sun in Milky Way galaxy in the story that holds all the planets but by maintaining its complexity. In his book, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida with his deconstructive approach demonstrates that the sign system is not stable structure of meaning but it is an endless process of meaning substitutions. Hence, the play of meaning substitution which Derrida termed as trace, supplement and the like.

Jean Baudrillard critiques about the very nature of sign through simulation of reality such as we are so caught up in this artificial world of ‘Simulacra’ that it would be difficult for us to distinguish between the real and the imaginary. He cites the example of ‘Disneyworld’ in the real world where the replacement of the real world by imaginary signs as we are so caught up in the image and its copies that we have no access to reality just as in the Disneyland. As Disneyland is visual representation of something whose original we will never know. So, we have copies of signs because there is no real sign of existence in reality. Similarly in the story protagonist lost in the space to find his real sign created by him but repeatedly he was unsuccessful in his attempt of finding the true sign rather he was distracted by another sign.

Ferdinand De Saussure in his essay “Nature of the Linguistic Sign” in which he has tried to explore the nature of sign. According to him signs have some attributes which makes it to behave in an arbitrary manner. Hence, the creation of meaning depends upon conventions and the prevalent situations of social structures.

Thus, how do signs acquire their meaning over time? As different theorists interpret it accordingly as Saussure has defined it that meaning of sign is arbitrary and depends upon the significance of relationship

between a concept and a pattern of produced sound where as Derrida observes that meaning is attained through deconstruction or to find its relevance almost not what the writer wanted to interpret it. Hence, it is an attempt to examine such ‘metaphysics’ of the structure. Baudrillard links it with hyperreal. The nature of sign is very dynamic and not static. Now, the question remains unresolved who made the first sign? Either God or the existing system of signs is the copy of original sign which Baudrillard tried to project through the hyperreal world. The signs exist before we create the things to which the sign refers. Thus we sense this loss of real in the world. As “authentic” is harder to achieve in hyperreal world where everything is copy of real. Hence, in “A Sign in Space” the protagonist examines that how signs become meaningless and creates paradox and unreliability in the existence of space as the narrator’s perceptions regarding Kgwgk’s sign action.

Among earlier classical theorists, according to Plato art/sign is merely copy and it does not represent reality. Thus according to Plato’s theory of mimesis (imitation) that art deals with illusion and it is the imitation of imitation as twice removed from reality. Similarly in postmodern world the reality is being replaced by images and copies of signs which itself is a copy of a real sign.

In the postmodern period the main concern of literary works is to project the reality of society. Literature is the mirror of the society which shows the prevailing social, political, and economic conditions of the world. The writer like Italo Calvino in the story “A Sign in Space” tries to convey the postmodern dilemma to readers. As postmodern period reveals “the meaninglessness of existence and the underlying “abyss”, or “void” or “nothingness” on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended”(Abrams 168). The protagonist’s sign created the impression of uncertainty regarding its essence due to the influence of time over it. Similarly, in postmodern age the individual’s belief system regarding customs, values seems to be shaken. As a result, the roles of gender and gender relations have also taken as granted which ultimately have no sure essence and changes over time. Now, the novice approach which is known as Postfeminism holds the opinion “. . . postfeminism as a dynamic critical concept capable of adapting to changing historical conditions and bringing to generations of women and men. . . that postfeminism has to be assessed dynamically in the relationships and tensions between its various manifestations and contexts” (Genz & Benjamin 28).

The author in the story tries to narrate the timeline of the story not in conventional style but in new manner as conventional story has proper beginning and the ending where as in postmodern writings the writer deliberately breaks these techniques of storytelling. Hence, the reader does not reach on the definite conclusion which is the prominent feature of postmodern writings. By leaving ending ambiguous and unclear, the writer just invites reader’s reaction that is to understand the meaning of the text accordingly to one’s experience or cultural baggage.

As Roland Barthes in his essay “The Death of the Author” narrates it is reader who interprets the text as per the needs, experience and the cultural baggage of the reader. In the postmodern world people are trying to create their own individuality through the cultural baggage which they have brought from their experience.

Hence, postmodernism tries to rupture the traditional boundaries of demarcation and respect life as an individual which Calvino remarkably projects in it.

Conclusion:

In the present society the perceptions and personalities of individual are changing with the passage of time. In order to bring change in the existing system of the society, people in postmodern world are engaged in creating an innovating idea but those ideas are not novice in real sense rather these are based on past experiences which directly or indirectly affect humans in the present day society.

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