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INTERTEXTUALITY IN YANN MARTEL'S *THE FACTS BEHIND THE HELSINKI ROCCAMATIOS*

Dr. T. Vijayalakshmi

Assistant Professor

Department of English

PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu

Abstract: This article is an attempt to bring out the notion of postmodern intertextuality as a strategy of narrating the stories in relation to *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories* by Booker Prize Winner Yann Martel. The story creates a perfect balance between the moments of a Paul's deterioration. Moments of pure passion, anguish, love and pain are connected with snippets of major historical events that have been ear marked as major moments of the twentieth century. Martel's choice of intermingling various literary allusion, direct quotation from literary and non-literary texts proves to be an intertextual reading.

Key Words- postmodernism, intertextuality, storytelling, historical events, literary allusion

Intertextuality becomes an important literary discourse in postmodern literary theory. It refers to the text's relationships to other texts directly or indirectly in the narration. Postmodern influences can be seen in terms of how stories are told, including the portrayal of multiple versions of a story within the same book, telling stories within stories, or blending genres such as mixing fiction and nonfiction or fiction or history. This article is an attempt to bring out the notion of postmodern intertextuality as a strategy of narrating the stories in relation to *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories* by Booker Prize Winner Yann Martel. As Hutcheon points out,

Postmodernism, as I am defining it here, is perhaps somewhat less promiscuously extensive, the notion of parody as opening the text up, rather than closing it down, is an important one: among the many things that postmodern intertextuality challenges are both closure and single, centralized meaning. Its willed and wilful provisionality rests upon its acceptance of the inevitable textual infiltration of prior discursive practices. (Poetics 127)

The first story in the short story collection named *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* is an account of Paul's suffering and his eventual death. Paul contracted the deadly HIV virus by transfusion of blood in Jamaica. Cary Fagan says, "Yann Martel's first collection of stories is notable on the one hand for its warm human voice and on the other for a precocious pleasure in experimenting" (22). The story revolves around a man, along with his friend who is dying of AIDS. Paul and his friend create stories about a family of Italian immigrants living in Helsinki, Finland to help pass the time. They made it very clear that they are going to share the story of the Helsinki Roccamatios. They set a small bookcase with wheels beside them with all thirty-two volumes of the 15th edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and a three-volume work called *A History of the 20th Century*. They use *Encyclopaedia Britannica* extracts from each year starting from 1901 until 1986 to write each chapter. Umberto Eco rightly says that

[a] text is a device conceived in order to produce it Model Reader... A text can foresee a Model Reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. The empirical reader is only an actor who makes conjectures about the kind of Model Reader postulated by the text. (59)

Martel combines two distinct genres of writing into a perfect hybrid. Both history and fiction appear to be equally intertextual. "Like those recent theories of both history and fiction, this kind of novel asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time" (Seamon 212-16). History can be perceived in a million different ways. Facts are differently perceived by people of different nationalities and by people of different ages. Graham Allen points out,

[i]ntertextuality, as a concept, has a history of different articulations which reflect the distinct historical situations out of which it has emerged. The important task ... is to understand that term in its specific historical and cultural manifestations, knowing that any application of it now will itself be an intertextual ... event. (59)

The narrator and Paul pick random events from each year as a background for constructing a story reflecting a particular kind of picture about the world. The historical events connecting to real life experience show the link between two different layers in the story. The story takes place in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. The story takes place in the mid-1980s. Each episode resembled one event from a consecutive year of the twentieth century. The narrator narrates odd years and Paul narrates even years. They discussed about Helsinki thus,

We discussed what we knew about Helsinki and agreed on the following: one, it had a population of one million inhabitants; two it was the capital of Finland in every way- political, commercial, industrial, cultural, etc.; three, it was an important port; four, it had a small but fractious Swedish-speaking minority; and five, Russia always weighed heavily on the mood of the nation. Finally, we agreed that the Roccamatios would be a secret between the two of us. (FBHR 23)

Martel is actually not concerned with the Roccamatio family, instead he picks up historical events taken up by Paul and the narrator. The narrator tells, "... the purpose of this story, is the Roccamatio family of Helsinki. That's not Paul's family; his last name was Atsee. Nor is it my family" (FBHR 15). "But a story must also stimulate the mind if it does not want to fade from memory" (FBHR IX).

The obvious motif in the creation of the Roccamatio family is to escape into a dream world to forget the impending death of Paul, the stark reality which they are unwilling to accept. It helps them to move from their wretched reality, to forget about their present dilemma yet gives Paul a sense of importance as the creator of a story. Story telling helps the narrator to treat Paul's problem of paranoia. Paul loses hope as health deteriorates in spite of the treatment he undergoes for AIDS. As Paul realises that his life span is short, he becomes paranoid. The narrator, Paul's friend uses story telling as a tool to comfort his physical and mental agony. Their stories are often changed and rewritten by both of them according to their mood. The narrator is sure that he has to carry out the story by himself. He tells, "And I would have to be well prepared so that I could carry the story all by myself when Paul was too weak or depressed ... everything besides the story was useless, even his desperate existential thoughts that did nothing but frighten him. Only the imaginary must count" (FBHR 18).

The narrator got inspired from Boccaccio's *Decameron* where people pass their time by telling stories to each other when the city is afflicted with plague. Boccaccio used story telling as a technique in the fourteenth century, the narrator and Paul plan to use it in the twentieth century. Mentioning Boccaccio's *Decameron* is also a very good example which shows the narrator's intention to call attention to the fact that stories can exist within another story. He explains thus,

Two words stopped me dead in my tracks: Boccaccio's *Decameron*. I had read a beaten-up copy of the Italian classic when I was in India. Such a simple idea: an isolated villa outside of Florence; the world dying of the Black Death; ten people gathered together hoping to survive; *telling each other stories to pass the time*. (FBHR 17)

The story moves between unexplainable twists and turns based on Paul's condition. They come out with good events like the discovery of insulin when Paul is happy. "1921-Frederick Banting and Charles Best discover insulin, the glucose-metabolizing hormone secreted by the Pancreas. It is immediately and spectacularly effective as a therapy for diabetes. The lives of millions are saved (FBHR 41)". They discuss incidents like Spanish Civil War when they are not in good mood. "1936 The Spanish Civil War begins, exceptional in its bloodletting ferocity (FBHR 63). Their choice of selecting events from national history and personal story depends upon their state of mind. They talk about events like boxing championship when they both are not in good mood. There is always a connection between the twentieth century history, and the Roccamatios story. Their storytelling has a parallel account on Paul's physical and psychological condition. A.C. observes, "Martel shows how free and yet connected to our history we are when we create and what creative treasures the dying man is leaving behind as he relinquishes his power of story-telling" (21).

Storytelling elevates the story to the greater heights though the subject is sad. The suffering of the teenage friends, one undergoing treatment for AIDS and the other providing a moral support to him reflects the postmodern condition. Though scientific research and medical science has been well developed, the protagonist suffers from psychological trauma as he is unable to accept that he would succumb to the disease shortly and their idea of creating stories provides the necessary solace to accept Paul's imminent death.

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