DEMISTYFYING THE IDIOSYNCRATIC FABRIC OF A NOVEL

IN ITALO CALVINO'S *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

Manisha Mishra

M.A. in English

Student, Gauhati University

Abstract:

The oeuvre of Italo Calvino makes him as one of the most challenging Post-modern writers. His magnum opus *If on a winter's night a traveller,* questions the very idea of creation of a novel. In this work the entire anatomy of a novel is put under scrutiny by using Post-modern techniques. Beginning from the authenticity of the author to the writing style and printing process is constantly put into trail by Calvino. The paper seeks to analyze how Calvino through this work attempts to cross-examine the genuineness of the body as well as the printing process of a novel.

Key words: Novel, Structure, Authenticity, Post-modern, Printing process.

Italo Calvino, as a writer, can be placed among the Post-moderns. The Post-modern writers rejected the long-established notions of the ancients and moved beyond the fixities of the moderns. These writers rejected the 'master narratives' and deconstructed the origins. In their works we get a sense of fragmentation and decentralization of the focal point. Basically there is a subversion of the conventional order of ideas and the nucleus is lost. "Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist high art…" (Abrams 177)

If we do an in-depth study of Calvino's work *If on a winter's night a traveler* we clearly get to see the elements of Postmodernism. He almost ridiculed the entire fixed structure of novel writing as well as the authenticity of the printing process. Calvino here questioned the very ground of existence of all knowledge related to the structure and printing of a work. He

presented it in such a way that reader's reliability on it becomes contentious. He turned the entire matter into a debatable issue in such a way that "rationality, logicality, sensory data, intuitive recollection and even language are not considered as reliable sources of knowledge for either ontology or epistemology" (Bharvad 164)

Encyclopedia Britannica states 'novel', as "an invented prose narrative of considerable length and certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience, usually through a connected sequence of events…." The validity of this definition is tested in this text. Calvino through this opus interrogated the concatenation of a novel. In this volume we don't get to see a fix plot or a structure which we generally get to see in conventional novels. In fact the events which take place are not in a string. Everything is almost distorted and disintegrated. This gives rise to a suspicion in us about the faithfulness of the entire structure and the base of the work. We do not find any unity or wholeness. The entire composition of the novel is bewildered by Calvino which is kind of a mockery of the attached construction of a novel. "Calvino rejects such unities and completeness or closeness of a novel…." (Bharvad 164)

When we start to read a novel extensively we expect to get a storyline which in spite of detours will somehow come to an end ensuing the traditional structure of a novel-beginning, middle and end. However in *If on a winter's night a traveller* we get to see that this fabric is rejected. There is no single thread in this work. In fact we can hardly call it a plot because there are many beginnings, leaving the readers in a complete state of disillusionment. Rather it includes "meta-fictional quality by exposing the narrative process to the reader and including him in the process of the construction of the same…." (Bharvad 165) When we move further in the text from one chapter to the next we see there is no connecting link between them. In every chapter we get to see new characters, new setting which does not have any connection with the previous one. Basically there is no unity among them. The only thing that is common in all the chapters is that they are unconventionally incomplete. It seemed as if the author started writing them, proceeded towards the middle and suddenly stopped and started writing something else. In fact all the chapters are shown as different novels that the reader from the text came across while trying to find Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*. "…from the very first page you realize that the novel you are holding has nothing to do with the one you were reading yesterday." (Calvino 33) Calvino here ridiculed the customary ceaseless narrative, which begins and ends,

and all the fixities related to a plot are brought into question. It is exhibited that the conception of an unbroken narrative does not poses any relevance in the Post-modern era. By and large after a chapter ends, the next chapter that follows will have some connection with the previous one. Nonetheless in Calvino's work all of them seem to open with some meaning or with a proper beginning but they are not interdependent as they should have been. Everything is disjointed and broken or not interconnected. There are so many gaps in the plot that the reader in the text is confused of what is happening around. He is demented throughout because, he, while looking for one correct book came across so many narratives that now he does not even know which belongs to whom and what exactly is he reading.

Notwithstanding novels or any work is anticipated to have an ending. But here all the chapters conclude straight away without any open or closed ending. The starting of all the chapters is sudden and the endings are inconclusive. We find an infinite course of beginnings which never ends. All the beginnings start with a new setting, new characters and new action but do not go anywhere at all. It seems as if they are all lost somewhere in the thin air. They start and forget to finish and just remain open at the end. Calvino through this kind of a narrative is trying to dissect the entire anatomy of a narrative. This shows that "Calvino deconstructs both the beginnings and the ends. There is more than one beginning of the novel and in some way, there is no end." (Bharvad 167)

In *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deluze and Guattari , writes about the uncertainty of a text and says that " In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity. Strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialisation and destartification" (4) The plot of *If on a winter's night a traveller* is so complex that every time the reader reads from the text it feels like a new book. It brings a feeling within the reader that he/she is looking at the book for the first time and reading something completely new and the previous chapter has nothing to do with the new one. This is because of the incomprehensibility of the structure of the novel. By using this kind of a narrative the reliability of a reader upon a text is put under qualm by Calvino. "I, too, feel the need to reread the books I have read but at every rereading I seem to be reading a new book, for the first time…" (Calvino 255).

"Traditionally, the production and dissemination of recorded texts had been conceived mainly as a self-contained and one-way process, in which the author conceives and inscribes a text, the

publisher and the printer reproduces the text in multiple copies, and the competent reader interprets the text in order to reconstitute the author's originating conception." (Abrams 37) But in this novel by Calvino, if we carefully observe the chapters where the reader from the text or we can say Calvino himself is communicating with us to put forth the mistakes, that might occur during the printing process. In fact the author is trying to show us the unreliability of the whole procedure which makes us doubtful about the accuracy of other texts as well. In chapter-2 of the book we discern that the reader has mentioned about some misplacement of pages in the book by the publisher, "Wait a minute! Look at the page number. Damn! From page 32 you've gone back to page 17! …printer's mistake: they have inserted the same pages twice." (Calvino 25). In chapter-3 of the book, Calvino also talked about the pages mistakenly left blank while printing. And after the blank pages were turned the plot and characters cannot be linked. It seemed like because of the blank pages something is missing and now the plot cannot be connected. "…You turn the page and find yourself facing two blank sheets…. You turn another page and find the next two printed properly. Blank, printed; blank, printed; and so on until the end…. You try jumping over the gap….the characters have changed, the settings; you don't understand what it's about…" (Calvino 42-43) These are indeed some serious mistakes. Because once we find these kind of problems in a text we start doubting the entire text as it is not something generally we expect either from the author or the publisher. The printed text is taken by us almost like something carved in stone. And in that kind of a situation blunders like these by the printer disorganize the entire structure of the text and also the mind of the reader. Calvino by portraying this is creating doubts in us in such a way that the genuineness of the procedure becomes vacillating.

There is also a mention of a translator named Ermes Marana. The reader from the text wanted to meet him and know about the reason behind such unpardonable publishing mistakes. But shockingly the reader instead of getting an answer to his queries comes across another strange and unexpected issue. The translator once, while translating a novel, at the moment of greatest suspense, stopped and started translating another novel and merged it with the earlier one. And when the translator was investigated and asked for an explanation for such an unforgivable fault, he does not even bother to care about the matter. "What does the name of an author on the jacket matter? Let us move forward in thought to three thousand years from now. Who knows which book from our period will be saved…" (Calvino 101) A number of errors of these kinds related

to printing and publishing are brought into light by the reader from the text but it all turned out to be of no use. The explanation given by the publishing house is incomprehensive. Calvino through this novel also broke the conventional relation between a text and a reader. Preferably he encompassed the readers in the progression of the whole text. The use of the second person narrator 'You' in the entire book shows the unswerving incorporation of the reader "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel *If on a winter's night a traveler.* Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought." This insertion of the reader in the text and expressing the reader's inconveniences shows the presence of the reader-response theory. It is not merely a theory but the sharing of the readers' experiences while participating in the process of interpreting the text. "Reader-response criticism does not designate any one critical theory, but rather a focus on the process of reading a literary text that is shared by many of the critical modes" (Abrams 255) The way in which the readers from this text shows the disruptions faced by them and their attempt to investigate the entire problem and find out a solution to it shows that the gaps present in the texts can be fulfilled by the reader. "In Iser's view the literary text, as a product of writer's intentional acts, in part controls the reader's response but always contains a number of 'gaps' or 'indeterminate elements'. These the reader must fill in by a creative participation…" (Abrams 256)

From the above deliberation it can be concluded that the novel *If on a winter's night a traveller* is a scheme set up by Calvino to question the arrangement and the printing process of a 'novel'. The complete procedure is fractured and deconstructed by him to destabilize the fixity allied to it. He blurred the demarcations between the authentic and unauthentic works and made everything debatable. He tried to show that there can never be a fix meaning of a text as Harold Bloom said, "reading is…misreading" (Abrams 257). A single text may have many interpretations depending upon the reader. Generally the readers utterly depend and blindly trust on printed materials. But this novel poses a question on the originality and reliability of it and creates a scenario which makes us doubtful about the validity of such published works. Everything in the novel is confusing and unfathomable. At every point Calvino provokes us to question the norms and concepts, related to writings, we are accepting as fixed till date. If we look into the characters of Marana and Flannery from the text it makes us more suspicious about the dependability on the printing process because they are offered in a light which is doubtful. Marana is presented as a fiction writer and a translator but at the same time also a plagiarist, who

merges different novels and publishes them under his name whereas Flannery is showcased as an eminent and bestselling author but his documentation is dubious. Hence it can be stated that being a postmodern writer, Calvino, completely renounced the conventional fixities related to the structure of the novel and the legitimacy of the printing process and switched to the state of uncertainty which made the readers feel that they are thrown into a black hole and there is no way out of it. He wants the readers to look beyond the stagnant ideas of a book and keep the mind open for all kinds of possibilities. Being a postmodernist in and out Calvino found completeness in the incomplete, perfection in the imperfect and stability in the unstable and wants the readers to see the world of literature as same. This novel can be considered as a landmark in the world of postmodern writing and a perfect document which stands for postmodern traits questioning all kinds of fixities.

Works cited:

Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham.*A Handbook of Literary Terms.*New Delhi: Cengage learning, 2011.

Bharvad, R.K. "The deconstruction of form as a postmodern way of narration in Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*".*Research Review Journals.* Vol.03,Issue-01, 2018.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a winter's night a traveller.* London: Vintage, 1998.

Deleuze, Giles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* London: Continuum, 1987.

Panigrahi, Sambit. "Is Calvino Postmodern? Rereading *If on a winter's night a traveller*".*Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science and English Language.* India: Amit Publisher and Company,2014.