INTERROGATING THE NATURE OF FICTION THROUGH ANDRE GIDE’S POETICS OF FICTION IN THE COUNTERFEITERS

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ABSTRACT

Self-reflexivity is an important literary method to investigate the phenomenon of artistic creation. Among the various genres of literature, novel seems to be the most dynamic and ever changing one. This research paper interrogates the process of fiction-writing with specific reference to Andre Gide’s The Counterfeiters. Gide has brilliantly exploited the technique to discuss the writing process. The novel is replete with vital discussions on theme, plot, characterization, representation of reality, depersonalization. The narration through a journal of a novelist character serves dual purpose of narration as well as recording the unrefined impressions of the artist. The picture of psychological, emotional and literary self of the artist that emerges out of this discussion serves as an authentic insight into the creative state of mind. Gide has brooded over the whole problem of the novel as a work of art. It is also an attempt to rediscover, to re-create and to justify the genre aesthetically. In his novels Gide has tried to justify his choice of novel form and to incorporate into his work a theory of novel.

KEYWORDS: Meta-fiction, Novel.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of literary creation has always been an intricate matter since ancient times. Right from the Greek concept of artistic creation to the modern concept of automatic writing, there have been speculations and arguments on the actual process of writing a piece of literature. For example, while Plato, in his book Ion call a poet a holy winged creature who cannot write unless he is out of his senses, the modern criticism applies the psychological aspects like ‘sub conscious’, ‘id’ and ‘collective unconscious’. In this regard, the concept of self-reflexivity acquires significance. It is the technique which allows us to peep into the minds of literary artists and gives us some authentic glimpses of the actual process of creation. This research paper looks into this technique of self-reflexivity and analyses Andre Gide’s The Counterfeiters in the light of the term ‘meta fiction’.

Though meta-fiction is a feature of post-modern literature, the earlier literature is not completely devoid of it. For example, Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy has employed this technique. To take few names from recent literature we can refer to Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire, John Barth’s Lost in Funhouse and William Golding’s The Paper Men. But during late
nineteenth and early twentieth century when meta-fiction was not a common characteristic of fiction, Andre Gide (the Nobel Laureate, 1947) brilliantly exploited the concept in his works.

There are certain reasons why it is of great importance to investigate into the nature of novel-writing through self-reflexivity. The form of novel has always been on a flux; creating the new structure on the ruins of its previous one. Its span is very vast and the genre is almost unclassifiable. Fiction has a notorious capacity to cross boundaries and integrate other genres. More than any period in French literary history, the time span between 1880 and 1920 revised expectations about what the idea of literature was, and where were the defining terms for fiction in particular. Perhaps it is the definition of ‘the novel’ which possesses most difficulties. In the French tradition in particular, the novel has a history of questioning itself, redefining itself, seeking itself out, challenging its own identity and status as a literary genre, and blending into other genres:

Another reason for this tendency of the novel to undermine its own procedure may be that the genre poses an inherent problem of acceptability. The novelist is using extended narrative, precise denotation, detailed description, the evocation of verifiable realities and facts. (The Cambridge Companion to The French Novel: From 1800 to the Present, P. 8)

Such is the protein capacity of the novel to adapt, that even the work or style judged most ‘un-novelistic’ will inevitably be novel proper sooner or later. Again the French novelists are vulnerable to extensive theorizing tendency. The most important point is that time span during which Gide wrote was one of experimentations. Again various avant – garde movements like Existentialism, Expressionism, Imagism, Impressionism, Symbolism etc. were proliferated in literature. Thus literature in that period was on a kind of flux: innovations in themes, techniques and style, multiple narration, self-reflexivity and so on.

Gide’s desire was to strip the novel off every element that does not belong to novel proper. It is because he is interested in a pure novel. Yet all the conventional elements of novel are found in The Counterfeiters. All the events succeed in a well organized manner and the novel comes to an end with two happy and one tragic incident.

Glide’s major concern was for the character of Edourd- the image of an artist whose aim is to translate real events into a work of art i.e. novel. In this process the diary plays an important role. It is the reflection of the journal maintained by Gide himself. It records the surge of creativity to write a book and thus becomes an analysis of the process of evolution of the work:

The author himself is constantly warning us that the journal is a kind of self-imposed discipline, that he returns to it only when no other task is demanding his full attention, or even, on occasion, to set down certain ideas he can find no place for elsewhere. (Gide: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 154)

Journals can be useful in many other ways. They can describe the author’s frame of mind. We can come to know that what was going on in the author’s mind when he was writing that particular work. On the part of the author, journal can be the primary source for the main script or draft. Gide believed that an individual being should be scrutinized with the help of personal
records in order to arrive at general which explains him. Through his journal Gide had tried to understand himself. This is the primary function of journal and so it is indispensable for understanding Gide’s works. On the other hand journals can function as a literary means to record the creation of the work: “I shall take good care not to lose this one, in which I am writing now. It is my pocket mirror. I cannot feel that anything that happens to me has any real existence until I see it reflected here.” (The Counterfeiters, p.175).

Gide loved to question about the problems of an artist, of art itself and of emotional and psychological workings of mind. Since Gide’s works are replete with journals, they become a moral and psychological commentary on the artistic creative process. These journals address a significant problem of artistic creation. If one tries to express emotions, is not the expression an alteration of the genuine emotion? If this emotion is revised or refined, is it not farther alteration? Gide had many times revised his journals (second alteration) and thus he had tried to give an impression of himself. But this image was altered, willed and carefully organized. However, these records might have enabled him to free himself from his complexes, to set himself at a certain distance and make a critical examination.

Edourd is the central character in the novel. He is a novelist and like Gide maintains a diary in which he notes down day to day events and happenings. Edourd’s journal comprises about half the novel. It contains his reflections on the events, people and on the novel which he is going to write. But a reader does not find any particular element or feature which can differentiate between the journal and the narration done through the third person singular. What he narrates during his participation in the events is akin to the reflections noted in the journal. The only difference between him and the other narrator is that he knows and recalls the past.

In the first part of the book Edourd and Oliver meet each other at railway station. Edourd throws unconsciously his clock room ticket and Bernard who is following them picks it up. He carries away his bag but thinks that he has not stolen it. He finds out a journal in the suitcase and reads it with great interest. Edourd is planning to write a novel with the title ‘The Counterfeiters’. He has been thinking about this novel since long time. He has not written even a single line of the novel but has noted down his ideas and reflections in a notebook. As we know, Edourd is interested in a pure novel. He distinguishes various fields of art. Outward events, accidents, traumatism belong to cinema. The novelist should not give too exact a description. Specific description stifles the readers’ imagination instead of encouraging it. The readers should have some liberty to enjoy articulation of their own. Edourd also discards the method of psychoanalysis. People feel what they imagine they feel. For example when one loves, one only imagines that one is in love. The readers’ imagination should not accumulate details but he should adapt to proper points. Edourd gives more importance to the point of view. George Lucas has said that Modernist writers suffer from a lack of perspective and point of view. He is more conscious of other’s point of view as they reveal a new way of looking at the same matter. “In Gide’s poetics the individual reader is as important as the writer who also speaks from a definite position, to a particular social context”. (Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940, p. 174)

This refers to an existential problem- the problem of the other. Till the middle of the novel we are baffled as to who is the narrator of the entire story. It is revealed at the middle of
the novel that there is a third person narrator who appears to be omnipresent. No single point of view directs the narrative. It is an element of experimental writing. It is said that experimental writing is a type of writing where even the writer does not know where to stand in his own work. The narrator starts to tell the story and readers first identify him with the author. Abruptly the narration is handed over to Bernard. After that the point of view shifts backward and forward as characters move in and out of the seen. Gide has successfully dealt with this shift and there is smoothness and fluidity in the narration. But each point of view sheds light only on fragmented actions. Edourd’s visit to La Perouse reveals how a single fact or event can be narrated and analyzed and even justified from different points of view. Both of them (The Perouse Couple) analyze each other’s actions cynically and absurdly. Whatever one does is to annoy the other.

It is impossible for Edourd to temper with reality or real facts. He cannot alter them without altering the whole. Till now he has fed his works with subjective feelings, emotions and experiences. But now his life has begun to depart from his works: thoughts and feelings are being separated now. Comte De Passavant is his contemporary. Edourd does not have least esteem for him as far as his literary status is concerned. Passavant’s works assert the convention forcefully because they do not have significant content. His works initially strike as modern but very soon they turn into an outdated work. It is because Passavant addresses the young generation. Certainly it is better to address today than to address the yesterday. But such works extinguish with the youth. On the contrary Edourd wants to write about the problems which people will have to face tomorrow. He would write to satisfy curiosity yet not formed, to satisfy the demands yet not created. Today’s child should find him on his way for tomorrow. According to Gide a true artist is one who does not look back at past writers and their works to receive some sort of support to progress farther. On the contrary one must try to change the goal of art. As a genius he must raise the problems of art in his individual way. He thinks that there are few poets who have allowed them to be guided by their feelings for art rather than by feelings of their heart. He possesses a singular faculty of depersonalization which enables him to feel the emotions of others. Edourd wants to land more objectivity to his writing. Chekhov once said that one should write only when one is as cold as ice. When Edourd refers to depersonalization, it is essential to know Gide’s views on this theory. For Gide the self is divided into intimate and external self. The later is shaped on the basis of the former. Is it just to refuse or to deny the power to the intimate self without whom any work of art cannot exist? If all the works are devoid of the author’s personality then one work would no longer differ from others. Thus the instinctual originality is derived from the intimate self and so it must be given due importance. The approach of critics towards his works irritates him a lot. He feels that the qualities that people ascribe to him are the ones which he detests most. Here comes a Modernist and Post-modernist element. The Modernists believed that criticism reduces the autonomy of art and reduces a literary work to an absurd level. He even perceives a change in his self. It is not that he has changed, but now he has begun to discover his real self.

During his stay in Saas Fee, Edourd talks about his novel, its plan and subject to Bernard and Sophroniska. He has not yet decided the subject of the novel but he feels that it should be new and there should be no repetition. Novel is a genre that denies the overcoming of rules and conventions. It is free and lawless medium of art. This liberty may be the reason why novel has always clung to reality. The novels are akin to one another as far as their newness and freedom are concerned. Novel tries to go nearer and nearer to Nature. Here Nature refers to natural,
realistic and objective depiction or it means to describe things as they are without taking any sides. Edourd is against the notion that novel should rival the facts. The problem of an artist is: how to express the general through particular and how to make particular express the general? An artist always has to make an attempt to localize and specify the actions and characters but while doing so he restricts the scope both in spatial and temporal context. For Edourd novel should be true and at the same time far away from reality. It should be specific and general as well. Elizabeth Bowen writes in her essay “Notes on Writing a Novel”:

Plot is story. It is also “a story” in the nursery sense—lie. The novel lies, in saying that something happened that did not happen. It must, therefore, contain uncontradictable truth, to warrant the original lie. A mass of subjective matter that has accumulated—impressions received, feelings about experience, distorted results of ordinary observations, and something else. (Perspectives on Novel, p.217).

Here it seems that Edourd is fumbling as far as his ideas about his novel are concerned. Whenever he is asked about his novel he describes it in different ways. Edourd does not want to give any specific subject to his novel. If he does so, he will be curtailing the scope of the novel. The school of Naturalists would try to project a slice of life. But in order to take a slice they have cut it in the terms of length and breadth. Edourd does not want to cut anything and wants to depict the whole. Edourd has reality on one hand and desires to put it into art by stylizing it. For this purpose he intends to invent a character of a novelist who can talk what life offers to him and what he wants to make out of it. Thus the character in the novel wants to abandon reality but Edourd will bring it back to him. In this respect the subject of the novel might be the struggle between the facts presented by reality and the ideal reality. According to Gide art is a moderate thing. An artist should not strike balance between idealism and realism. Nor he should leave either of them entirely. He can go near to either of them as long as he is able to touch the other. One can touch the two at the same time and fill the space in between. Edourd perceives a kind of disjunction that he feels between himself and reality. The central idea of the work will be “What I want is to represent reality on one hand, and on the other that effort to stylize it into art…. That very struggle between what reality offers him and what he himself desires to make of it.” (The Counterfeiters, p. 207) There is a world of appearances on one hand which imposes itself upon us, and on the other we have our own interpretations and images that we try to impose on the outer world. This is the struggle that forms the drama of life. When we try to resist the overcoming of facts, we transform our ideal constructs in to dreams and feature life: …paradoxes which abound in the writing and the reading of novels. In order to speak the truth, the novelist has to invent and pretend. So even as is makes statements about verifiable realities, the novel willingly exposes the lie of its own discourse. If the novel is to aspire to a higher truth, it must of course reveal its paradox. (The Cambridge Companion to The French Novel: From 1800 to the Present, p. 7).

In his journal Gide has made a clear suggestion that Edourd is at heart a Symbolist. He is reluctant to examine the texture of human life and this results in his hatred for realism. There after Gide treated Edourd’s book as something which will never be accomplished. Whenever someone asks him about the plan of his novel, he fumbles and talks about it in a different manner each time. He is afraid that he may be unable to finish his task. Defending himself Edourd has to say that if he does not finish his work it will be because he is more interested in the history of the
book than the book itself. He wants to write a novel of ideas rather than the one on human beings. He is more interested in the ideas rather than in man.

At the middle of the novel the author takes rest and broods over the characters. He claims that he is completely detached from his characters. Lets them behave the way they want. Once they are born they develop and shape themselves on their own without any external guidance:

Character description in The Counterfeiters is at odds with the realist convention or relating cause and effect. It is rather the unpredictability of the conscious mind which determines human behaviour. The variability of characters is an obstacle to the psychological analysis, but if Edourd were asked to choose between that variability and laws of psychology, he would rather do without the latter. (Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940, p. 195)

The author is happy with the characters of Bernard and Edourd while that of Passavant irritates him a lot. Characters like Laura, Douviers and Boris are minor ones who had come in his way when he was dealing with Bernard and Oliver. Even Edourd discusses the process of characterization from the point of view of consistency. If characters behave as per our expectation, we think them to be constant in their behavior. But on the contrary it is the element of their inconsistency that makes us recognize that they are artificially composed. As a general fact naturalness and consistency cannot go together. Exceptions are the cases in which inconsistency itself is a made up behaviour (Self conscious originality). However the more fundamentally generous an individual is, and more fertile in possibility, the more liable he is to change, and less willing to allow his future to be divided by the past. In another chapter Gide has illustrated this theory by discussing the behaviour of Vincent and Laura at Pau. Vincent’s seduction of Laura and her submission to him is the behaviour which is inconsistent. The reason why this behaviour should be appreciated is that it was natural for them to behave in this way. Both of them thought that they were on the verge of death. Again they were far away from their parents and society. In this situation what appears to be unnatural for us is a natural behaviour for them. Gide farther focuses on the process of characterization and discusses the evolution of the character of Vincent. Vincent’s education has made him materialistic in nature and so he finds it very easy to triumph over him. This demon is the stealthy corruptor of conscience that portrays one’s defeat as one’s victory. At the first stage in the development of Vincent’s character he feels abide by moral duty to help Laura. His will force him to give five thousand franks. This behaviour projects Vincent as a noble, respectable and generous person. The second stage is one of uneasiness created by doubts. The demon tempts him to increase the amount. The loss of money at the third stage gives him courage to overlook adversity. This fortitude enables him to confess the loss to Laura and thereby to dessert her. At the fourth stage, in order to legitimize himself, Vincent renounces conventional morality and invents new ethics. Finally he is intoxicated by his victory and feels at the top of the world. When he thinks that he is the freest creature, in reality he is merely an unconscious victim of demon.

Edourd does not believe that when one begins to write a novel one must have a plan in his mind about the ending of the novel. It is because he portrays a life and life can never be predicted nor it gives anticipations. The novel The Counterfeiters ends with Edourd’s aroused interest in Caloub. Apparently it seems that the novel has ended on a note of continuity. In fact
the organized succession of events is artistically brought to a conclusion. The motion unleashed by the energy of the novel at the beginning arrives at a rest in the end. Bernard returns home, Oliver is taken care of by Edourd and Boris is dead. Thus the end which appears to be continuous is actually again a conventional end.

Thus a common fact that emerges out of this discussion is that by using meta-fiction as a technique, Gide has crystallized the concept of fiction writing and has also artistically dealt with related issues. Use of journals, characterization, realism, plot, an artist’s role, ending of the novel Contemporary criticism had compelled Gide to brood over the whole problem of the novel as a work of art. Gide attempted to rediscover, to re-create and to justify the genre aesthetically. In his novels Gide has tried to justify his choice of novel form and to incorporate into his work a theory of novel.

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