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**INTERSECTION OF MODERNIST ELEMENTS OF  
MEMORY, TIME, NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND  
SYMBOLISM IN JORGE LUIS BORGES'  
*THE SECRET MIRACLE***

**Athira T.P.,**

M.Phil Research Scholar

&

**Dr. R. Chandrasekar,**

Associate Professor and Head,

Sri Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya College of Arts and Science,  
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

*Abstract: Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine poet-writer and recipient of multiple critical acclaims illustrates the genres of Magical Realism and Surrealism by imbuing his works with philosophical and fantastical elements. The Secret Miracle (1943), Borges' short story under perusal, is an extensive study on time and its compression; denotative of the narrative structure employed. By an examination of the permeation of modernist elements within the text, the researcher intends to discover the stronghold of such elements in inducing a divergent reading experience.*

Key Words: time, memory, repetition, symbol.

Full paper:

Jorge Luis Borges' story *The Secret Miracle* commences with a Korean epigraph, indicative of the compression of time; a recurrent motif in this prose piece. It serves as an embodiment of a supposedly brief conversation between God the creator and man, his creation. The same theme also bears extension in relation to the writer and the text. The above mentioned phrase depicts acknowledgement of time as an imaginative tool in the psyche of the individual; held differently depending on the human tendency to either live each day as it comes or work towards a goal with a mindset deferring no time to contemplate upon the gradual progress of life. The story follows a frame narrative, wherein there exists a story within a story. It is not as dispersed as latter texts would be when modernism would embrace experimental forms and techniques in application to the text, drawing attention to the process of creation; altering the basic outlook to the finality previously engendered by a text.

The story, an embodiment of Borges' thorough knowledge regarding classical rules, uses T.S.

Eliot's idea of modification of texts by an influential past and the "Borgesian conundrum" (The principle of work/ text influencing the artist, and vice versa); an exploration of which will be undertaken as we progress further. Jaromir Hladik, the story's protagonist being a writer bears close resemblance to Borges and also affects a multi-dimensional dissolution of the text; laying bare the process of writing. The story encompassing a sub-narrative exists in terms of Borges' story *The Secret Miracle* being the story of a writer Jaromir Hladik, who in turn contemplates deeply the completion of his verse drama *The Enemies*.

Borges' inclusion of the past through evocation of writers from the past begins when, through Hladik, he imagines a sub-plot for *The Enemies* as involving two contending families (similar to that of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, rid of romantic spirit; and involved in power play. The families could also be a fictitious extension of the conflict (war) between Germans and Jews in Hladik's life, with the historical setting being Nazi occupied Prague during World War II). The similarities between real and fictitious contenders lie in their constitution and depiction of human beings in strained, constructed conflicts; not pre-existent from its inception but engendered so (bearing striking resemblance to Simone De Beauvoir's definition of gender).

The play within the story has a dramatic setting, driven by portrayal of passing time and a sustenance of plot; with the leading character having encountered erasure of memory (within a dream) in relation to the rules of the game. Then again, there is portrayal of the Chaucerian dreamer (Hladik); alarmed into awakening. A constant play at intermingling reality and fiction is in effect. The writer as protagonist lays claim over the autonomy

of one's text, by an infusion of imprints representative of the author's distinction.

Hladik being in a situation similar to India's Emergency, (with basic rights under suspension), gets arrested for the dispersal of truth; with modified interpretation as driving ploy for revolution by manipulation of mindsets of people against the totalitarian regime using his pen/ art. Hladik, being led to the prison cell, is depicted as 'aseptic and white'- rid of impurities (made sterile) by a disinfection of sorts; aiding interpretation as a literal, non- metaphorical, cleansing of the allegations attributed to him by the authorities. Hladik's arrest made conducive by his Jewish ancestry and status, being a public representative, renders a threat to the freedom of expression.

Words in the text embody dual characteristics- firstly, as communicators of one's opinions and secondly, as weapons incriminating its creator (the writer); with his publications being held as proof of criminal offense (for inciting revolution), earning him a death penalty. Repetition, another device in major use within the text, affects consolation regarding death being a fear inducing entity in its symbolic nearness to closure of life, alone. The repetition serves to unite writer(s) with the commoners, taking into account their similar reactions to death; an equalizer of sorts.

With reference to the writer's anxiety regarding the imminent closure of one's life, it is said: "he died hundreds of deaths"; a possible invocation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, drawing distinction between people's differing perspectives on death based on characteristics of courage and cowardice. While courageous people experience death once, cowards experience the same in multiplicity; propelled by the 'fear' of death. Life (a construction) played out in the imagination involves exploration of highest potential, weaning, decay, death and reincarnation; aiding portrayal in a cyclical manner, bearing semblance to real life. At one point it is suggested that the day set by Julius Rothe (the Judge in charge of Hladik's case) was drawing close. At this juncture, the researcher enquires the credibility of this sentence, philosophically, by questioning whether a person's death can ever truly be determined by other humans. If it does, what then is the power of God? Modernist elements within the text, insist on a re-assessment of every aspect of existence.

Man's existential beliefs regarding death, have found voice in the protagonist defying oncoming death ("I am invulnerable, immortal") when faced with mortality; where the instance of wishing away death is symbolic of an attempt at regaining control over life. A venture at holding onto superstition in

the face of death amounted to nothing, however so. An extensive use of metaphors has been accomplished, with descriptive phrases such as 'fugitive substance of time', and 'precipitating' having entitled to time an elusive, escapist and diminishing characteristic; where the statement 'nights of sleep as dark pools to submerge in' provides, briefly, an in-depth assessment of the psychic state of depression and 'sleep as a dark ocean drowning him' as acknowledgement of drifting or being passively led towards death. The writer wanted to evade his imaginative mind to such an extent that even death was deemed welcome, as the final act of closure alone could save the writer from the dark recesses of his mind.

The author uses the terminology "problematic practice of literature" to embody the field as an active, not passive entity. Hladik, the writer seems to derive purpose in life by a reminder of his unfinished work *The Enemies*. By the way of self appraisal, this work is held far better than his previous works; giving forth interpretation of the writer being aware of one's incompetencies. Owing allegiance to archetypal theories, Borges' in his work remarks experiences as not novel but repetitions of the bygone. The author's curious approval of verse drama has its basis in the generation of conscious awareness in relation to the artificiality of the work (in the audiences' mind) with a clear demarcation between reality and unreality; that helps maintain distance (affecting alienation) between work and the audience, which serves in opposition to the previous attempt of writers to have readers relate and emotionally connect to their work. Also, sudden shifts from reality to bookish detail bars reliance on any one element, and therefore complacency. Multiple consciousness affects portrayal in the text by an expression of the psychic states of different characters. Baron Roemerstadt, in *The Enemies* meets with strangers who seem to have been encountered in dreams, vaguely; embodying a feeling of the Deja Vu. His fictitious existence is marred by transference of his attributes onto others. The fourth wall of theatre, has been transcended by a modernist application to literature; wishing to actively engage the audiences.

Repetition, in relation to the day order, is depicted by an acknowledgement of time as seven in the evening, the setting sun, mention of the western sun and Hungarian music each day. The insane character Kubin's presumption of the Baron's identity helps attain imaginative realization of his love for Julie de Weidenau; the Baron's fiancée. An entire sequence is materialized before we are enlightened about the constructed reality or fabrication put in effect by the character Kubin, whose delusional perspective leads the readers

awry. Thus, repetition is of crucial consequence in relation to the event that sustains Kubin's imagination and life by his constant reminiscence of it. Repetition of each day is made manifest, with Hladik engrossed in an endless loop; a continuous process to find meaning in life. Mid-story, the author dispenses with third person narrative for narration in first person. The text is to the author as is human to God and therefore it aids representation of memory, creation and fantasy as interlinked entities.

Time is viewed as a transitory entity, with reference to the imminent death of Hladik. He wishes for an extension (of time) to bring glory to his creator, by the completion of his text. Infinity and repetition endure recognition in relation to paths undertaken to achieving God. Repetition is affected in terms of involvement of library as a recurrent motif in Borges' works, with particular reference to the Clementine library in this work. Borges' high appreciation of learning and literature is apparent in the motifs used. The following statement is a clear case of repetition, endorsing the difficulties in the spiritual quest; individual to each person: "one of the letters on one of the pages of one of the 400,000 volumes of Clementine." Also, the sentence "My fathers and the fathers of my fathers have sought" God. It is suggested that, people have gone blind in search of God; alluding to the loss of literal vision in order to gain spiritual vision or sight to see God.

The announcement of a prophetic solution in a dream, by a universal voice deemed God's; is perceived as a covert tap on the sub-conscious of the individual. According to the author, dreams belong to God; yet they can embrace alternate interpretation as manifestation of the inner workings and voice of humankind (the collective unconscious). Hladik's touch on the map of India within the atlas is a reminder of the perception of India, as the destination for those seeking spiritual solace.

Symbolism is employed, within the text, in instances where imagination (romantic ideas, twisted labyrinths) and reality (single iron stairway) are juxtaposed. Julia de Weidenau is

termed a mere symbol of the real woman imagined or referred to by Hladik. Modernist elements and perspectives have interspersed with the age and mindsets of people so much so that cruelty has replaced kindness and rationality has overcome human sentiments of sensitivity and emotion. Alienation is made manifest in the textual instance, wherein care is bestowed upon inanimate objects, while humans face disregard (concern regarding blood splashing on the wall and not the killing of a man); and the objectification of man in death. Jose Patrick's statement "War and industrialization seemed to devalue the individual" acts as representative of the age of modernism. At the moment right before death the purview moves into the self-conscious of Hladik, the writer turned convict. Time is held in suspension when the statement "physical universe stood still" is noted in the conscious of the convict. Foreclosure is depicted in the thought process: "I'm in hell. I'm dead." The recognition that death would entail a final closure of his thought processes, in itself represents rationality and logic even when faced with fear.

Hladik chants the fourth eclogue of Virgil, a prophetic statement regarding the birth of Jesus. However, Hladik chants the stanza with the intention of attempted influence over the scenario wherein he imagines his grief being shared by the officials surrounding him; embodying a single shared consciousness, a mode of thinking prevalent during the modernist era. His own stillness is transported to the environment and the people in it, giving the reader an inkling of writer Hladik's role as creator and the scene being a construction of his mind. A complete rejection of realism is made manifest in the realization of God having granted Hladik his wish of extended time (of a year) to finish his verse drama, in his imagination and not in reality. He dies on the day prescribed but with the sense of relief that he affects the completion of the story in his psyche, driven by an epiphany, within the compressed time frame between the command of fire and his execution. The conceptual conclusion of story parallels death of the writer, asserting the question of the written word's significance on humanity.

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