

A Travesty of the Academia: David Lodge's *Small World*

- Reza Hadizadeh

Abstract: David Lodge's fictional enterprises pore over various fundamental socio-cultural issues like cultural diversity, racism, multiculturalism, and even drastic changes in sexual mores to mention a few. *Small World* is among the best ever penned by Lodge's; the novel throws light on some undisclosed, lesser known domains of the university professors' lives while using humour and Parody as complementary devices to attain the best results. Through the paper it is attempted to provide a w/holistic view of the interfacing of fact and fiction, literature and life in *Small World*.

Keywords: David Lodge, Literary Theory, Parody, Romance, University.

The term Travesty is frequently used as a synonym for Parody. In Literature, a Parody imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and applies the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject. As an instance, Henry Fielding (1707-1754) in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) parodied Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-41) by putting a hearty male hero in place of Richardson's sexually beleaguered heroine. (Abrams 18) In contemporary scene, the function of parody is often condensed to scoff at or imitation along with some kind of negative connotation. Fred W. Householder (1913-1994) while defining parody as a narrative poem of reasonable length, in epic meter, using epic language, and treating a light, ironic, or mock-heroic subject, also makes an expansion to describe it as a 'device for comic quotation.' (Rose 7) At the same time, it is also possible to state that the incorporation from one text to another can produce a comic divergence or incongruity between the quoted text and its new context. But such a quotation, no longer holding the similar connotation as that of the original text, acquires some new implications in its new perspective, frequently embodying the author's attitude towards the parodied text. For that reason, the discrepancy or inappropriateness between the parody and the parodied text will be capable of producing hilarious scenes. As Margaret A. Rose stated in *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern* (1993), even the ancient literary scholar distinguished between the 'purely comic' and 'critical-ridiculing parody.' (23) In actual reality, the parodist is bestowed with the authority to merge critical thoughts, and the element of ridicule together, which provides astonishing resources for the assortment of various implications of parody. Although

quite a lot of contemporary critics acknowledge the fact that most associations of parody with the burlesque or ridicule has seen it being criticized for the unhelpfulness or destructiveness of its nature, there are still other scholars who judge the aspect of ridicule as an affirmative, sensible, and constructive quality.

David Lodge has luminously employed parody in his novels, especially in his outstanding trilogy of campus novels, *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988) published in 1993. As a postmodernist parody, intricately created to the point of amplification, *Small World* merges form and content and embodies in its structure the very obstacles on the way to the completion of the quest that it treats thematically. The novel's subtitle, *An Academic Romance*, reveals some unique sort of oddity that helps to make its treatment of parody. However, parody in Lodge's fiction is being incorporated in order to create and knit an integrated, powerful structure and to pave the storyline for a smooth, enhanced progress of the plot. The novel is populated by naive, morally polarized characters involved in dubious chains of events, and is profoundly dependent upon outrageous coincidences. In *Small World*, the contemporary critical vista is lampooned as a malicious, mysterious jabber of hostile thinkers and literary theories propagated by narrow-minded, selfish academics. All different sorts of modern and contemporary literary theories are skilfully explicated through the speeches and even consciousness of the university professors at various symposiums and literary gatherings, which constitute the arena for the clash of conflicting and contradictory voices in the novel. Indeed, the absence of intellectual guidance in modern society is crystallized through these voices. Like Eliot's *'The Waste Land'*, Lodge portrays our modern civilization and culture as spiritually shrivelled and barren in nature.

Small World is undoubtedly an ideal instance of a true campus novel too. Unlike the previous campus novels of Lodge, the focus in *Small World* is no longer on localities, but on cosmopolitan dimensions, by means of a large quantity of primary and secondary characters and polyglots as delegates of the global campus. Parody as a device of producing comic effect, has played a crucial task in *Small World*. The main body of the novel is built around a parody of the medieval romance called the Grail legend and the perpetual quest of the main characters is responsible for the progress of each chapter through the course of the storyline. The novel actually contains two Grail quests: that of McGarrigle for Angelica, and the rivalry for the UNESCO chair. *Small World* is not celebrated as a great romance, but the emotional and at times sensual revelation of its multiple chronicles allied to the characters' quest stimulates the excitement and delight in the readers' mind. The journeys of worldwide seminars, along with a grand number of characters facilitate the novelist to build up the romance plot. Romance allows the author much more freedom in his constructing of the specific accounts and minute details. Northrop Fry in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1975) said that romance gives more autonomy to the writer:

The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. (33)

Small World “deals with phenomenon of global academic travel” (Thompson) and Lodge might have got the inspiration for penning from his own personal experiences of travelling around the World to attend international symposiums and conferences. In this case, one can conclude that *Small World* is some kind of self-parodying. The novelist has incorporated and converted some key elements of the Grail myth into the real world of academia to meet the proper condition for his narration. Having said that, a question comes forward that what is the logic beyond choosing the Grail legend and the subtitle of *An Academic Romance* for *Small World*? In an interview with Raymond Thompson, Lodge has responded to the question:

The reason why I thought of using the Grail legend in *Small World* is a very simple one. When I started thinking about the novel, I wanted to deal with the phenomenon of global academic travel. The idea came to me at a James Joyce conference in Zurich, which in fact is one of the settings for the novel... This is where I started: a kind of academic comedy of manners, with a global dimension. The characters would travel widely, having adventures as they went. (Ibid)

There are resemblances that really exist between the story of *Small World* and the Arthurian story, mainly the Grail quest in which a select crowd of knights roam around the planet to earn the Holy Grail. The Prologue of *Small World* is a parody of the Chaucer's *Prologue of Canterbury Tales*, and the global seminars of scholars are compared to the medieval pilgrimages by the pilgrims:

“The modern conferences resemble the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austere bent on self-improvement.” (*A David Lodge Trilogy* 225)

Subsequent to the Prologue, the first section of the novel commences with the opening line of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, as a significant intertextual source:

APRIL is the cruellest month,” Persse McGarrigle quoted silently to himself, gazing through grimy windowpanes at the unseasonable snow crusting the lawns and flowerbeds of the Rummidge campus. He had recently completed a Master's dissertation on the poetry of T. S. Eliot, but the opening words of *The Waste Land* might, with equal probability, have been passing through the heads of any one of the fifty-odd men and women, of varying ages, who sat or slumped in the raked rows of seats in the same lecture-room. For they were all well acquainted with that poem, being University Teachers of English Language and Literature, gathered together here, in the English Midlands, for

their annual conference, and few of them were enjoying themselves. (229)

T. S. Eliot's famous poem is quoted by the central character of the novel, Persse McGarrigle, through whose eyes the omniscient narrator acts. All the conferees, namely Teachers of English Language and Literature, are gathered at an annual forum in Rumridge campus, Lodge's invented locality situated in the central England. Tediousness seems to be the prevailing theme of the environment which can be recognized on the faces of most of the characters, and even the "unseasonable snow" (229) makes no contribution to alter the atmosphere, but quite the reverse; it reinforces the vigour of gloominess. In addition to this, parody in *Small World* is also employed as a connecting link for a variety of characters. As pointed out earlier, parodying a romance bestows the writer more autonomy in formulating coincidences. Coincidences not only remind the reader of the author's mentality behind the plot but also suggest the world of academia is truly a "small world," where individuals might encounter each other at international conferences around the globe. Another vital theme of the novel *Small World* is individuals' quest: one for fame and power; the other for sensual activities and sex. In the first part of this quest, the Quest for Holy Grail is embodied as the UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism with a sweet tax-free annual wages of US\$100,000 and no regular rough duty that perpetually occupies the psyche of the senior academics like the elderly impotent (both sexually and intellectually) Arthur Kingfisher, the distinguished professor of literary theory - that his name undoubtedly is an allusion to the Fisher King who appears in a number of Arthurian romances - or Philip Swallow, and becomes an extremely important quest of the novel and implies a great deal of confrontations and adventures. The Holy Grail stands for quest for women too, via the character of Persse McGarrigle who is rather depicted as a farcical figure in the novel; he becomes a modern Don Quixote who chases Angelica Pabst from one place to another. As a result, during the narration of different quests and satirical juxtapositions, the human flaws and weaknesses of academics are being portrayed in a very sardonic way.

Small World covers a variety of critical theories that can be used as an introductory course book for beginners of learning modern critical theories. However, Lodge uses these theories - to serve his purpose - for the progress of the story-line; which means to say that the literary theories are never objectively incorporated into the body of the novel; on the contrary, they epitomize some deep philosophical connotations, as representatives of the novelist's mind set. Relativism is not what Lodge is trying to attest, but some sort of Pluralism in order to perceive the humankind in real perspective with infinite opportunities ahead. On the other side, supporters of Deconstruction consider the possibility of interpretation of literary texts since they believe the meaning of text as the free play of signifiers. Morris Zapp as Lodge's spokesman makes it clear in his lecture:

The reader plays with himself as the text plays upon him, plays upon his curiosity, desire, as a striptease dancer plays upon her

audience's curiosity and desire... the dancer teases the audience, as the text teases its readers, with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed. It is the delay in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself; because no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and crave another. (253)

Small World's opening section of part five, namely The MLA (The Modern Language Association of America) Convention can be looked upon as the zenith of the clash between various literary theories supported by the literature specialists and partakers in the symposium; the place where diverse and occasionally complementary interpretations are offered with respect to the title of "The Function of Criticism." Philip Swallow is the first speaker. He makes use of Dr. Johnson's definition of criticism and its complementary role to literature. Michel Tardieu articulates his views on the function of criticism and adds: "the function of criticism is to uncover the fundamental laws that enabled such works to be produced and understood." (556), and Siegfried von Turpitz discusses about the Reader-Response theory. The Italian Fulvia Morgana maintains her Marxist views, and the American professor Morris Zapp said more or less what he had said at the Rummidge conference. Towards the close of the MLA session, when Arthur Kingfisher – known as the king of literary theory – asks if there were any questions or comments, Persse McGarrigle proves to be the most brilliant mind among all the eminent international literary scholars present at the conference; by posing a somehow tricky question Persse asks about the true function of criticism and settles the debate: "What follows if everybody agrees with you? What do you do if everybody agrees with you?" (557) Soon after Persse's query, Arthur Kingfisher says: "You imply, of course, that what matters in the field of critical practice is not truth but difference. If everybody were convinced by your arguments, they would have to do the same as you and then there would be no satisfaction in doing it. To win is to lose the game." (558) Lodge's rationale of designing such a scene is to provide evidence for the interactive and colloquial nature of literary criticism, and to admit that there are assorted and every so often opposing attitudes about literary criticism. He maintains his standpoint about this in his critical book *After Bakhtin*:

In Bakhtin's perspective it is not possible to say the last word about anything in the human sphere, whatever maybe the case in the physical sciences, and he venerated Dostoevsky for founding his art of fiction upon this principle: at the end of Dostoevsky's novels, says Bakhtin, 'nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not been yet spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and always will be in the future.' The subject therefore always entails a certain measure of self-deception or bad faith which manifests itself in various discursive symptoms. (94)

To sum up, it is possible to say that Lodge in spite of mastery and expertise in contemporary modern criticism; he chooses to safeguard his

traditional humanist view of criticism. In *Small World* he has principally employed the literary technique of parody (with an extensive practice in Western literary theory) as a pertinent tool for enhancing the effect of the narration. The message Lodge tries to put across in the course of his elaborate style of writing is his affinity and enthusiasm for liberal humanism and his aversion for the anti-humanist, deconstructionist evaluation of texts which he portrays via extensive parodies of diverse critical theories throughout the novel. The tendency of putting an end to the theoretical margins between creative and critical discourse as one of the central hypotheses of the traditional humanism has constantly been a preferred issue for post-structuralisms. David Lodge's method of criticism puts emphasis on humanist values and role of the common sense, and evaluative criticism in textual structure rather than its content or context. As a critic, Lodge has pursued interest in developing practical approaches that would help for interpretation and evaluation of novels that he himself called "poetics of fiction" in *The Novelist at the Crossroads*. (55) What Lodge attempts is a systematic and comprehensive depiction of the objective techniques and methods rooted in language that enable literary texts to communicate their meaning and function. To meet the challenge in *Small World*, Lodge has also made a high-quality use of postmodernist techniques such as parody, polyphony, and even flashbacks to mention a few. He further adopted Bakhtin's theory of "Heteroglossia" to negotiate among miscellaneous and divergent beliefs and attitudes as a way of coming to terms with contemporary realities presented in his fiction.

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