

Structural Legacies in Magical Reality: *Borges* as A Wandering Teller

- Garima Kalita

Abstract: Maybe it is a fact that Jorge Luis Borges is not strictly read as an author affiliating towards magical reality; but the ambience he creates in his fiction, the fantastical element that is introduced thorough the lines make it very much akin to it. It is our contention that he creates that aura through the terse form that he adopts, the suggestion that the simple or ordinary is led to a distance and defamiliarised, so that the conventionality disappears and a newness, a magical reality replaces the authenticity of the real or the supreal and veracity and untruth. It is our contention that Borges is also a bricoleur who integrates diverse kinds of myth, legend, landscape, community, ritual, magic and psyche together, though Borges never accepts that his is a psychological study.

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What is narrativity linked with magic realism? Or in a loosely asked question, how is the 'purpose' or objectivity fulfilled in a narrative by this extra realistic device that questions the plain and straight statements about real and factual? These are characteristic seminal queries through which a narrative or a story reaches forward and in a conventional sense develops. Obviously the focus is now on a non linear or circular mode of representation which ensures that the reader is confronted with an apparatus which structurally and also thematically enriches his imagination.

But after awhile there is an inevitable pause that falters in more than two ways. First, the linearity of the fabula calls for a stern scrutiny and the resultant jumping or jarring episodes link themselves up not as an integrated whole, rather as autonomous identifying markers. One associated idea that is hundredth of times elaborated is the forked endings or multiple pathways through which the narrative is told, deciphered and registered or kept in abeyance.

Culler's assumption that in a narrative a double reading is almost always inadvertent, in itself seems to be crude generalizations because a few specifically specific cases by Freud or the reading of *Daniel Deronda* do not offer comprehensive peripherality.. The distinction between Fabula and Sjuzheth in the first place seems to more preliminary than other

serious issues at hand.¹ The narrative read solely on this trajectory of fabula/ *sjuzhet* dichotomy at moments offers a crude subscription of factorial² devices. But the question of linearity can best be overcome by the inclusion of an extraordinary device which in itself contains the subject object binary along with form content dialectic. The perspective or voice of the author is taken for granted in the sense that it remains in an altogether different plane. The constancy of the subject position, in fact to the benefit of the story works by tilting the plane completely, whereby it changes the intensity of vision and equally the emotion.³

Once the term 'story' is uttered we tend to enter into the realm of a different identity, which is categorized or circumscribed by language – written or oral. So language becomes the autonomous tool which gives shape to the 'thing' or the essence of the story with a small s.⁴ But this is distinct from reality or the 'real', what is –here we tend to visualize, fantasize or under delusion act and take for granted the erroneous, grafted, illusion for fact/knowledge. This is actually acting upon reality or fact, the 'isness'. Culler in a winded manner called this skeletal essence which is preconceived as the 'story'. That essential idea, which the telling or narration moulds within a specific structure. But what we contend here is that the story is the telling. Without the telling there is no story. This integrated whole of the story and the telling is better termed as narrative but it does not lose a substance if we identify one with the other. The post modernist emphasis on language or the structure and form essentially probes into the genealogy, a development and the culminatory form of story. For further clarification I'd like to draw a parallel between Borges and Marquez on one hand and Dickens and Defoe on the other. The reason why these authors are picked up, actually highlights the nuances or the trajectory of story telling, the space allotted to narrativity and ideas related to the narrative pattern.

Language as the perfect device does not merely convey, it forms a tradition, a culture (Lacan, 82) which confers upon it the duality of being the means and the executor of the means, an autonomous doer. It works upon people, mode, psyche and also something called fate. The Heideggerian stress upon language, his distinction between the state of being and the state of becoming too obliquely touches the essential conundrum of representation and fact. What he considers as the duplicity of states like "speaking of language" while actually 'speaking about language' is rather highlighting that intrinsic quality of language. "We speak of language, but constantly seem to be speaking merely *about* language, while in fact we are already letting language, *from within* language, speak to us, in language, of itself, saying its nature." (Heidegger, 85). The complexity of matter is simplified by a lucid statement of the philosopher, when he deliberates "This is why we must not prematurely break off the dialogue we have begun with the poetic experience ..." (Heidegger, 85). Of course the context Heidegger refers

to is reading of a poem by Stefan George, which as he tries a subtle analysis of the nature of signification, becomes a statement about the word's reaching over to the "thing". But that fact does not deny us the use of a general statement founded upon the argument. Hence language is double faced (literally) and the concepts it carries too, in a rebounding manner pose questions, then offer answers by itself. The ambience of half truth and half reality created by magic realism is woven around the reader in such a replicated and overlapping manner that he who walks past it finds it magnificent and terrorizing. He cannot as it were shake it off, entrenched, he goes forward, and for the moment he forgets to draw a line between true and false, fact and fiction, illusion and reality. So it is a vacillating moment of acceptance, a state of duality but nevertheless a token of confirmation of life.

In the wandering tales of Jorge Luis Borges the state of perfection, the comprehensive world of unity manifest in "Aleph", also in "Funes –His Memories" and stories like "The Maker" and others forms the crust and the essence. The Universe is the enormous library⁵ which fountainheads infinite number of tales, spins it rather as he says it or creates; in more precise terms constructs it from existing cues. The suspense of judgment which is achieved immediately makes for a smooth entrance of the state of dream or fantasy, ..Borges develops language as sign, strictly on an arbitrary level, but another signifying sign of thing, *Map* standing for the land does not profess that arbitrariness. For Korzybsky, the pioneer advocate for general semantics 'map is not the territory'⁶ as everyone would tend to agree, but in Borges's satirical gestus the map is taken in its 'exactitude'. The storyteller tends to half mockingly suggest –Is science exact? Doesn't the exactitude of science lose some of its validity when an ancient map is produced..." in that Empire, the art of cartography attained such perfection that the map of a single province occupied the *entirety of the city*..." (p.325) The ingrained sarcasm of Borges does not profess bitter pungency; after all the elliptical pedantry of the lines suggest the futility of such vanities! In fact for the wise story teller the part and the whole, 'the map and the territory,' 'the explanation of fact and fiction' and in the utmost the signifier and the signified do not tantamount to surprised curiosity, rather an indifferent acceptance of life or fate.

Borges is a philosopher who attempts at probing into the light from the experience of darkness, the life from the experience of death...(p.339, "A Prayer", p.340-341, "His End and His Beginning") or vice versa. Every narrative howsoever small contains the infinitesimal or the microscopic ingredient of life. "Borges and I" is an epigraphic self analysis or requiem at the death of a self in the light of a doppelganger, the Dostoevskian "Double". The stereotypical line "...I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature and that literature is my justification." (p.324) curiously at the next instant strikes the

reader with wondrous revelation that "Years ago I tried to free myself from him, and I moved on from the mythologies of the slums and outskirts of the city to games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now, I shall have to think of other things." (p.324) The thin edge of mixing, fusion, becoming one with the other is the moment of epiphany in the discourse of the self and the other.⁷ The subtlest of the subtle game is constantly being played by man with time and himself. The brilliant story of "The Garden of the Forking Paths" in syncopated rhythm narrates the coward/hero's dilation of time as the ultimate labyrinth which curiously absorbs himself. Time exposed here is almost like Fune's game at collective memory, which he can see through the individual bits but not any way in general propositions. But in the 'Forking Paths' time's capacity at divergence and also convergence is tested. The fact that a man meets with diverse alternatives, and "chooses one and eliminates others" forms the crux of the narrative. But the character, the creator of the book of the labyrinth "chooses---simultaneously --all of them. *He creates*, thereby,'several futures', several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork."

In the "Afterword", the line "few things have happened to me, though many things I have read", becomes a representative statement of Borges, as life is beyond the felt experiences, it is at par with the *Words*. It is like language, that has been read, that contains and, in a mysterious 'aleph' like way reflects life ---the essence of which is not perceived in living. The magnum opus is *Life*, the connectivity through signs and letters forms the tradition of language which is engrafted in infinity. In the 'Foreword' to *Brodie's Report*, the master narrator justifies as it were, his use of Ostrananie⁸ the device of defamiliarization. As he says "I have set my stories at some distance in both time and space. Imagination has more freedom to work, that way." (p.347) This in fact serves as a preface to the magical realism that he portrays or realizes. Imagination set free from the shackles of reality or nondescript facts --which forms the outer façade of his tales. The element of story, the conventional approach with which we probe into incidents --happenings, are treated by Borges without any discrimination., whether it is magical or mundane. He tells a tale as it is, howsoever apparent things are or howsoever contradictory. He refers to an anthology of narratives as "In Praise of Darkness" (1969) and the said book is said to be his 'fifth book of verse'. But curiously that statement regarding those tales like, "The Ethnographer", "Legend", "A Prayer" or "His End and His Beginning" does not seem to be a false statement. Lucid simplicity seems to be preeminent mark here. But with the same blatant cynicism and bemused aphorism he refuses to declare his aesthetics which to him is no more than "useless abstractions."

The storyteller at the beginning confirms his staunch..., that of an impassive witness, the knower and the narrator, and then he speaks how something happened to him --the element of emotion and indifference,

both are present curiously. That marvelous distancing of Borges makes him an isolated figure... a monk, an ascetic, a total recluse. He transmits that magical quality to his protagonists. But the most ironical moment arrives when the protagonist meets the 'other, his indivisible identity yet fully equipped with the sources of the self. As if the moment of identity constantly flickers yet remains at the same spatiotemporal situation. The ultimate dilemma and confusion is confronted and brought to the surface in the stories like, "The Other", "Borges and I", "His End and His Beginning" and also in "The Shape of the Sword".

Shklovsky's mature observation on defamiliarization⁹ throws much light on Borges' style of description, which is authenticated by close reading of the situation –minute splitting of observation and immediate shifting of thought towards a terse analysis of the given situation. As a result of this process of stressing the hence before unstressed, colouring the light or grey with stark crimson –ordinary with the sense of something special..., make the narrative striking. Another striking feature one observes is the terseness of the lines, which not only condenses but also expands into thought. The reader reads the lines consciously, as riddles –(not to stress here, of course the strong poetic prose he uses) Borges crosses boundaries of terms, and traverses limitations, geography for him becomes the familiar landscape and it contains something, as Lawrence calls it 'spirit of place' . Borges as also his characters do, lives like a native pagan, pristine monk of some unnamed ritual of pronouncing words, inhabiting, sleering and dreaming the place, its spirit.

In Borges' magic realism a reverse ostrananie is at work, an act of defamiliarization giving extraordinariness to the mundane or day to day reflection or pain. At every line as it were there is a magical familiarity to the absurd, concocted reality made credible by pithiest of arguments that are easily swallowed by the wondrous reader, the fellow traveler in the mystical journey undertaken towards meaning. On the interrelation between Structural entity and hermeneutical semantics as G'érard Genette has pointed lucidly, it is not of "mechanical separation and exclusion, but of complementarity." (Genette, 71). Literary criticism which to Genette is a metalanguage, "discourse upon a discourse' as said by Paul Valéry. He even does not hesitate to call it a "metaliterature" (Genette, 63). Taking the same cue of narration within narration in Borges' fiction which obliquely tilts the usual plane of narrativity and switches between history, fact and fiction in a tantalizing manner, a linear yet curvature trajectory could be drawn. From this perspective Borges could also well be termed a bricoleur in Claude Levi Strauss' terminology.¹⁰ The way Borges integrates materials from myth, aphorism, legend, historical pieces, anecdotes, religion, parable and ties the broken pieces together, he deserves the efficacy of a 'maker' or an engineer bricoleur . In what seems to be a bemused acceptance or even denial, Borges speaks of the close yet remote relation of the reader and

the writer. In the Baroque pieces of *A Universal History of Iniquity*, (in the Preface) he describes the stories..."They are the irresponsible sport of a shy sort of man who could not bring himself to write stories, and so amused himself by changing and distorting (sometimes without aesthetic justification) the stories of other men."(p.4, *Collected Fictions*) This does not amount to the negation of one category as the admission of another in the sense that Borges must have been aware of the interdependence of texts upon one another - in other words of intertextuality. The arguments that Borges offers as justification of some events, decision, coincidences, and that set the line smooth or make the logic tenable also become sources of extraordinary and profound knowledge. They propel the magic imbibed therein to an easy glide and the tale finds its track forward. I am illustrating only a handful out of the infinite number of elliptical, profound maxims that dominate his world.

Though blind to guilt, fate can be merciless with the slightest distractions. Or Reality is partial to symmetries and slight anachronisms. (p. 174-175 "The South")

From learning to pity the misfortunes of the heroes of the novel, we wind up feeling too much pity for our own ; but not Recabarren, who accepted his paralysis as he had earlier accepted the severity and the solitudes of the Americas. A man in the habit of living in the present, as animals do, he now looked up at the sky and reflected that the red ring around the moon was a sign of rain. (p.169, "The End")

Whatsoever one man does, it is as though all men did it . That is why it is not unfair that a single act of disobedience in a garden should contaminate all humanity ; that is why it is not unfair that a single Jew's crucifixion should be enough to save it. (p.141 "The Shape of the Sword")

Maybe it is a fact that Borges would have never liked himself to be associated with the genre called "magical realism", may be he would have preferred a straighter version of it, but going back to the inherent structure of his fiction, that fantastical element that always gives it the spectacular feel of being typically Borgesian, makes it an integral part of story telling (story + form) or narrative or narrativity itself. ¹¹

Notes and References :

1. **Jonathan Culler** in his brilliant treatise " Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative" excerpted in *The Pursuit of Signs* ; Routledge, London(1981),2005 on a general level distinguishes between the two main axes of analysis for a narrative or work of fiction said to be fabula and sjuzhet or story or plot .
2. In the same treatise Culler offers radical reading of Freud's case histories, especially The Wolf man and *Oedipus Rex* . He also dictates a novel perspective of Goerge Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* on the same axes of Fabula sjuzhet dialectic advocated by the Structuralists and the Russian formalists .
3. The contention that I propose to raise here is not a denial of structural formulas of Culler which he rereads; here my reading is an extension of the structural axis pointing or tilting towards an openness which, to my mind, would accommodate Borges' careful strategy of form –content binary.

4. Jacques Lacan's contracted formula of the endless chain of signifiers over the real or signified symbolized by the small s stand thus ; S/s, which problematises the subject object or word thing equation. Refer to "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" in David Lodge: *Modern Criticism and Theory*, London and New York, Longman, 1988.
5. Reference is to the parallelism used by Borges in "The Library of Babel" between the library and the universe . "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries." (p.112), also "The Library has existed ab aeternitate." (p.113) *Jorge Luis Borges Collected Fictions*, Trans. Andrew Hurley, Penguin, 1998.
6. Alfred Korzybsky in his book, *Science and Sanity : An Introduction to Non Aristotelian Systems* (1933) introduced general semantics to the world. In this discourse the author attempts at solving general problems of either or logic of the great philosopher. The symbols are not essentially connected to the thing symbolized. It is analogous to "The word is not the thing" or "The map is not the territory" et cetera .
7. In his seminar on " Mirror stage as Formative of the function of the I " reveals the formation and function of the "ego" in a child of eighteen months when confronted with his own image in the mirror. This is the formation of the I and also curiously the other. Lacan calls this developmental stage as *Imaginary* as opposed to *Symbolic* and the *Real*. Refer to Lacan: *Écrits : A Selection*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, London and New York, Routledge, 2001
8. Ostranenie or defamiliarization is a term which once used by the Russian formalists became a key word for their critiquing the literariness of the language used in literature. Shklovsky in his seminal essay " Art as Technique " stressed that the deformation of reality, 'making strange' was central to all art.
9. Shklovsky in the same essay also discerns, " The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult ... Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object ; the object is not important." (Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Longman, p20)
10. The term bricoleur denotes a state of integrated engineering . Claude Levi Strauss uses the word for the literary critic who breaks down a structure into its elements. The parallelism is used mainly in order to point to the effective strategy undertaken by Borges the 'teller', of the bricolage, his narrative.
11. The preface to *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories* ; ed Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, Oxford, New York, 1999 discusses Borges as one affiliated towards the cause of his land, people and also culture.

References :

- Jacques Lacan : "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious " , Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Longman.
- Martin Heidegger : " The Nature of Language " in *On the Way to Language* (1959) Trans. Peter D Hertz (New York, Harper One, 1982.
- Ge' rard Genette : "Structuralism and Literary Criticism" in David Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Longman, 1988.
- All the lines from Borges' fiction, quoted here, are excerpted from his *Collected Fictions* ; Trans.: Andrew Hurley, Penguin, 1998.

