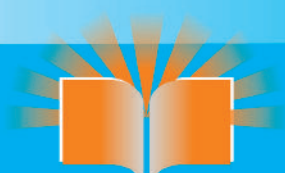


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Flaubert's Parrot: A Psychological Journey

Gajanan N. Katkar

Rayat Shikshan Sanstha's
Arts And Commerce College,
Madha, Dist - Solapur

Abstract:

Flaubert's Parrot : A Psychological Novel

A major Work – More complex in structure – different genres like fiction, biography, literary criticism skillfully mixed – divided into fifteen chapters, each one in different form – unusual narration of stories by main character , Braithwaite – deconstruction of chronology , biography, Autobiography, bestiary, philosophical dialogue, etc. – set in England and France – Three major characters – Three different stories woven together – novel runs parallel with Flaubert's – 'Madam Bovary' – characters analysed - central theme , quest for truth fused with subordinate theme of fidelity – written with the world view of life

Julian Barnes' Flaubert's Parrot was published in 1984. It represents a major step forward in his career. It is due to this novel Mr. Barnes has earned the fame of a novelist; otherwise, there was some controversy over whether the books Barnes writes are novels or something else.

The structure of Flaubert's Parrot is more complex as compared to his previous two novels viz. Metroland and Before She Met Me. Flaubert's Parrot has a boiling plot in which different genres like fiction, biography and literary criticism have been mixed skillfully. The novel explores the perimeters of fiction and reality and demonstrates mainly through its own narrative dislocations, multiple viewpoints, and overlapping genres – how art and life interact. According to the noted critic Bruce Sesto has expressed similar view :

In this, his third novel, Barnes abandons the chronological plot structure of conventional realist fiction for one which digresses, teases, breaks off, interrupts itself and makes use of alternating narrative voices and shifting planes of reference. (Sesto : 33)

It can be noted that Flaubert's Parrot contains a train-spotter's guide, on exam paper and a bestiary. These different prose genres deconstruct the conventional distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. So the structure achieves a deconstruction of prose genre taxonomies as a means of signification.

The novel has fifteen chapters and all of them are different in form. It is a story of Geoffrey Braithwaite, retired British physician who visits Rouen during a trip to France's Normandy Coast in order to relive his part in the D-Day invasion of Europe. While in Rouen, Braithwaite, an enthusiast tours the French novelist's birthplace, The Hotel-Dieu. Formerly a hospital, now a converted museum. The Hotel-

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Dieu contains an exhibition of sundry 18th and 19th century medical apparatus in addition to various memorabilia guaranteed to delight any devotee of Flaubert. Flaubert's father and brother were both prominent Rouen physicians and Flaubert himself is said to have wielded the pen the way a surgeon wields a scalpel. Braithwaite continues his tour of the museum, in one of its rooms he spots a stuffed parrot, the very same parrot, his guide informs him, which had served as the original inspiration for Loulou, Felicite's beloved bird in Flaubert's story "A Simple Heart".

Incidentally some days later, while touring Flaubert's house in the neighbouring village of Croisset, Braithwaite discovers another stuffed parrot. Puzzled by the appearance of this second bird, he questions the curator about the parrot he had seen at The Hotel-Dieu, whereupon the Croisset guide, bristling with jealousy and defensiveness, replies that her parrot is the authentic one. In a state of bewilderment, Braithwaite leaves Croisset determined to resolve discrepancy. In this quest for truth, the protagonist is seen criss-crossing the French countryside, writing letters, reading documents, and interviewing Flaubert authorities. By identifying the real parrot, Braithwaite believes that he will be able to gain greater insight into Flaubert's life and art.

As mentioned earlier, 'Flaubert's parrot' does not have the chronological plot structure of conventional realistic fiction but the structure of the novel is a combination of fiction biography, and literary criticism. The complexities in the structure have an influence on the techniques of the novel. Flaubert's Parrot is certainly different from the first two Barnes novels and the Duffy books. In *Metroland* the story is told retrospectively by a narrator who is also the main character. It uses first person narration and the person who speaks in first person is the person the book is about. Before *She Met Me* has a different narrative procedure. Here the narrator is a knowing entity, not a character in the books in other words it has third-person omniscient narrator. For Flaubert's Parrot Mr. Barnes has devised a different kind of narrator entirely. Geoffrey Braithwaite, a retired physician with an intent fascination with Flaubert, is the narrator. He explains :

Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen [his wife]. One about myself. My own is the simplest of the three My wife's is more complicated and more urgent; yet I resist that too Books are not life, however much we might prefer it if they were. Ellen's is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I am telling you Flaubert's story instead. (85-86)

Geoffrey Braithwaite is more explicit than other narrators about his needs. He begins to tell about his wife but hesitates, so he tells Flaubert's story to avoid his own and Ellen's. Barnes has another need his technique is more complex. He has no need to use Flaubert's story as a way of avoiding Braithwaite's, he uses Braithwaite's telling of Flaubert's story as Braithwaite's way of telling his own story, mostly against his will and without his knowledge. Terrence Rafferty comments on the artfulness of this technique :

Barnes has made him [Braithwaite] smart and funny and perfectly self-aware (he even acknowledges our suspicion that he murdered his wife). Too much correspondence between the narrator's Flaubert research and his summing up of his own life, and the novel would be just another overdetermined literary stunt, a donnish tour de force too little, and the conceit is pointless – or pointlessly arbitrary, which might be worse. ("Watching the detectives." *Nation* 241 (6/13 July 1985) : 22)

It can be noted that Geoffrey Braithwaite tells stories in unusual way. The stories are short, small and inconclusive about his voyaging into the whereabouts of Flaubert but the way they appear is hardly a narrative. Instead of narrative, the narrator provides an impressive mix of other types of prose : as Higdon argues, relating D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* : Flaubert's Parrot deftly deconstructs itself into various types of competing documents : the chronology, biography, autobiography, bestiary, philosophical dialogue, critical essay, manifesto, "train-spotter's guide," appendix, dictionary, "pure story" and even examination paper. (Higdon :180).

Like the previous two novels, Flaubert's Parrot also has the setting covering England and France. Gustave Flaubert is a significant French writer and Flaubert's Parrot has been used symbolically to view the life of the French novelist. The protagonist, Braithwaite, is curious to trace the authenticity of three of the stuffed parrots he comes across during his trip to France. In this expertise, the places he visits have been described so minutely to provide appropriate setting for the novel.

"Dieu I, was admitted by a gaunt, fidgety gardien whose white coat puzzled me. He wasn't a doctor, a pharmacien or a cricket umpire. White coats imply antisepsis and clean judgement. Why should a museum caretaker wear one – to protect Gustave's childhood from germs? He explained that the museum was devoted partly to medical history, then hurried me round, locking the doors behind us with noisy efficiency." (6)

Flaubert's Parrot contends with the other two stories apart from the one about Flaubert. One of the stories is about Braithwaite's wife, while the other is about Braithwaite himself. These stories take place in

from of the recollections. For these two stories, the psychoanalytical views of the protagonist provide setting.

As mentioned earlier, the protagonist, Braithwaite, tries to prove the authenticity of the Flaubert's Parrot. He remains curious throughout the novel, so the tone of the novel is also curiously funny to match the story and setting of the novel.

There are three major characters around whom the novel moves. Geoffrey Braithwaite, Ellen Braithwaite and Gustave Flaubert are the major characters in Flaubert's Parrot as three stories have been woven together covering the lives of these characters.

Geoffrey Braithwaite, the protagonist cum narrator, is a widower and retired British physician. Braithwaite is fond of Gustave Flaubert, a French novelist. Interestingly, he is seen to ask the readers regarding the stories he will narrate. Though he is equipped with three stories, he begins with the story of Gustave Flaubert and the remaining two stories have been mingled very beautifully in his narration.

Braithwaite comes across a stuffed parrot in a museum on a trip to France in search of Flaubert scenes and memorabilia. When he finds another similar parrot, he becomes curious to know which of the two is authentic. It is during this excursive voyage, Braithwaite reveals Flaubert's personality to dispel various rumors and misconceptions about the French writer's life, in part to demonstrate the enormous difficulties inherent in writing biography, and in part to indulge his own curiosity. His biography of Flaubert becomes an encyclopedic collection of disparate fragments-relics, anecdotal bric-a-brac which resist coherent integration. Patti White, a renowned critic, observes as :

Braithwaite assembles, collates, and eventually, fabricates data that, in the variety of their patterns and configurations, suggest a potentially comprehensive discovery or representation of Flaubert. However, the information models encoding Flaubert in Braithwaite's final document valorize fragmentation as a means of representation, actualizing in their structures the arbitrary and incomplete nature of personal historiography. (White, 1992 : 113)

It is noted that Flaubert's Parrot serves many ironical parallels between the life of its narrator and several key events in Flaubert's masterpiece of irony, Madame Bovary. Like Charles Bovary, for instance, Geoffrey Braithwaite himself, is married to an adulterous woman. But Braithwaite remains honest until the end of the novel. In the Flaubert's Parrot there is the major goal of Braithwaite, so only few of the aspects of his character can possibly be traced.

Ellen Braithwaite is another significant character in the novel, as the story of Ellen has also been mingled skillfully with the story of Flaubert. She is described as :

She was just over five feet; she had a broad, smooth face, with an easy pink in her cheeks; she never blushed; her eyes – as I have told you – were greeny – blue; she wore whatever clothes the mysterious bush – telegraph of women's fashion instructed her to wear. (196)

It seems that Ellen is a bold and attractive woman who is interested in keeping relations with several men. It is not surprising for a woman of fifty having a workaholic husband and children who are busy in their school education. Whenever she is with her family, she has hardly thought about her lovers. Being a woman in London, she has also a job. Though she has a job, she is not ambitious like promoting herself to a better position. It is not shocking finding Ellen to be a non believer in religion. She tells Braithwaite: People like us must have the religion of despair. One must be equal to one's destiny, that's to say impassive like it. By dint of saying "That is so! That is so! And of gazing down into the back pit as one's feet, one remains calm". (197-198)

It can be said that Ellen has been someone unknown and secretive for Braithwaite, until she dies. But Ellen has something mysterious, attractive quality which brings Braithwaite close to her although he is aware of her adultery. He says :

She was a much-loved only wife. She was loved, if that's the word, by what I suppose I must agree to call her lovers, thought I'm sure the word over-dignifies some of them. I loved her; we were happy; I miss her. (193)

In Flaubert's Parrot, there is a reference to 'Madame Bovary', a novel by Gustave Flaubert. The character of Ellen resembles the character of Emma Bovary of 'Madame Bovary'. Like Emma, Ellen also is an adulterous woman having blue and green eyes symbolizing wildness and jealousy.

Gustave Flaubert, a French novelist, who plays a metaphorical role in Flaubert's Parrot. The name of Gustave Flaubert is significantly included in the title of the novel as the protagonist, Geoffrey Braithwaite, engages himself to trace the authenticity of the stuffed parrots that he comes across during his excursion tour in France. In this endeavour, the life of Gustave Flaubert is enfolded like a cinema in flashback. Like Julian Barnes, Geoffrey Braithwaite is also obsessed with French novelist.

In Flaubert's Parrot, the biographical details of Flaubert have been described in the form of chronology of events, dictionary of persons related to his life, bestiary, philosophical dialogue, critical essay, manifesto, train-spotter's guide and an examination paper. In this unusual narrative the character sketch of Gustave Flaubert is revealed and exposed.

Flaubert is known for writing novels objectively. Flaubert aimed at objectivity in some sense of the word, but clearly his passions and hatreds were always engaged both in life and in his art. Flaubert, as his letters amply demonstrate, was always able to put his art before his love. His correspondence with Louise Colet, his mistress, is almost one long explanation of why his work prevents him from seeing her.

Flaubert's classic novel, *Madame Bovary*, has also been referred to in the novel. The character sketches of Braithwaite and Ellen resemble to the character sketches of Charles and Emma Bovary. In short, though the character of Flaubert is not seen to converse like the human characters in the novel, And though fictitious it is a central link among the three stories woven brilliantly together in *Flaubert's Parrot*.

Apart from these major characters, there are the other minor characters like Loise Colet, mistress of Gustave Flaubert : Emma Bovary and Charles Bovary; Du Camp etc.

Flaubert's Parrot contends with three stories, first about Flaubert, second about Ellen and the third about Braithwaite. All these stories have been bound together by incorporating a central theme that is quest for truth. Braithwaite, a retired British physician, finds a stuffed parrot during a trip to France's Normandy coast at The Hotel-Dieu in a museum. Surprisingly, while touring Flaubert's house in the neighbouring village of Croisset, Braithwaite discovers another stuffed parrot. Out of curiosity, he questions the curator about the parrot he had seen at The Hotel-Dieu, he is told that the parrot in the house is authentic one. Here truth, he is seen criss-crossing the French countryside, writing letters, reading documents, and interviewing Flaubert authorities. Presumably, by identifying the real parrot, Braithwaite believes that he will be able to gain greater insight into Flaubert's life and art. His journey ends almost exactly where it began – back in Rouen, in the upper chamber of the city's museum. He is permitted to examine three other stuffed parrots. After the painstaking attempt to authenticate one of the two original birds he had seen, this is precisely the conclusion Braithwaite arrives at : perhaps one of the stuffed parrots locked away in this top floor is the authentic one. A noted critic Bruse Sesto mentions similar view as :

As the novel unfolds and Braithwaite continues his investigation, Barnes' eponymous parrot begins to take on a multiplicity of meanings, referring by turns to felicitous beloved bird, a kind of architectural structure, a restaurant named after a parrot, language (parrots being the birds which imitate human speech without knowing the meaning of what they imitate), and finally the pursuit of truth itself (for just as there are many parrots by the end of the novel, so are there many ways of apprehending the truth or, better still, many truths to be apprehended) : (Sesto, 2001 : 37)

The central theme, quest for truth, is subordinated to another theme that is fidelity. In the novel, the protagonist Braithwaite is obsessed with the parrot and his wife, Ellen's infidelity. It is his pain and evasiveness regarding Ellen's betrayals force him to take interest in Flaubert. The story of Ellen is a running, usually completely implicit counterpoint to the story of Flaubert.

The idea of fidelity further links *Flaubert's Parrot* with other Barnes fiction upto 1984. In its permutation of infidelity, or adultery, this fidelity means more than not committing adultery. Braithwaite demonstrates a great deal of fidelity to Gustave Flaubert who demonstrated fidelity to his art. In this novel the most important examination of fidelity has to do with fidelity to fact or truth.

Flaubert's Parrot is Julian Barnes third novel, it has also been written with a world view like the previous two novels. During the post modern period, human psyche has been influenced by the changing scenarios in every stream of life. Life of a man has become episodic like the shades of colourful glass in a kaleidoscope. Mr. Barnes has made experiments in technique and structure in this novel. It is really an innovative and bold way to write a novel including the non literary forms like the chronology, biography, autobiography, bestiary, philosophical dialogue, critical essay, manifesto, train-spotters' guide, appendix, dictionary, pure story and examination paper. He has very skillfully incorporated these documents in the story of the novel.

Flaubert's Parrot also focuses on the themes of love and marriage. The theme of love is a significant theme in his novels. In fact, love and marriage are the topics of research in Mr. Barnes's novels. The protagonist, Mr. Braithwaite, loves his wife, Ellen. He is aware of her adulterous nature. On the other hand, Ellen's love for Braithwaite remains a mystery but she only thinks of her lovers in the absentee of her husband and children. This may be regarded as complexity in her emotional world. Another theme, marriage, which is based on the mutual trust, has also been discussed in the novel. The marriage is protected by the two in the novel; but Ellen's suicide brings it to the end.

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