

SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN UMBERTO ECO'S THE ISLAND OF THE DAY BEFORE

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Abstract

Umberto Eco's The Island of the Day before (henceforth referred as IDB throughout the paper) deals with a third person narrator narrating the survival events of Roberto della Griva's life in a deserted Pacific island. Roberto records these events as a manuscript in his diary. The narrator later reveals his assumption that this manuscript might have been discovered by Abel Tasman, a seafarer- in his fortuitous detours to the island of the same region and has come upon Roberto's papers in his adventurous voyages. The narrator then tells his readers the realm of conceivability: Tasman considers the manuscript confidential and passes it on to the Dutch geographers after realizing that the manuscript includes some discussion of the problem of longitudes. Years later, the invention of marine chronometer puts an end to the search of Punto Fijo. With this, Roberto's papers that have been once believed to be holding some important information regarding the search of longitudes, becomes no more a subject of interest and necessity. Hence, Roberto's papers end up in the hands of manuscript collectors like the narrator of IDB.

Keywords: *Umberto Eco, The Island of the Day before, Roberto's papers, Punto Fijo, Metafiction, postmodern, aesthetic illusion*

The novel *IDB* is a metafictional work with metanarrative structure that calls attention to the writing process itself. William H. Gass in his 1970 essay entitled "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction" coins the term Metafiction. Metafiction is specifically a fiction about fiction, i.e., a fiction which deliberately reflects upon itself. While metafiction deals with the explication of fictionality in the work, Metanarrative text deals with the process of narration itself.

Metafictional text with a metanarrative structure often possesses self-reflexivity within its narration. Another term for self-reflexive novel is the involuted novel. *Eco*, as an ingenious exploiter of the involuted novel, frames the self-reflexive narrative structure in his novel. *M.H Abrams* in his *A Glossary of literary terms* refers to self-reflexivity as the "process of composing the fictional story itself" (305).

A self-reflexive novel like *IDB* exhibits "reflexivity which self-consciously incorporates the process of production, construction and composition" (Woods 8). *Eco* in his novel *IDB*, assigns his postmodernist narrator to subject the self reflexive text to critical and sceptical analysis so that the readers can explore the narrative complexity in it. This exploration further takes the readers to the level of experiencing the challenges embedded within the comprehension of the self reflexive text. While analysis of meaning in a text is essential for its interpretation, analysis of narration in a text is much more essential to decode the intention of the text that the author has inculcated through the voice of the narrator. A self reflexive text always gives its emphasis to the conscious narrative process than the subject of the story.

This process in narration becomes mostly possible to evince postmodern simulation of narrative process when a frame narrative is employed in a text. Because, in a frame narrative, the narrator narrates a story or a tale to his readers that he has heard or read, and must have already been recited or narrated by someone else to him. In this case, the narration by a character, Roberto takes place first and that which is narrated by an unknown narrator himself to the readers happens later. The former is within the frame and latter outside the frame. The

double narration authenticity is often questioned and becomes uncertain to the readers. The narrator outside the frame will be able to narrate the story only when he assumes himself the role of the reader. Thus the actual reader and the narrator outside the frame of the text together read the text and have more chances to comment on the original narrator who was a character subjective to the live happenings. This kind of double narration resonates self-reflexive tendency in the novel.

The third person narrator intersperses his comments, opinions, deductions, understandings and surmises within the plot of the story of Roberto's life when he narrates the events in *IDB*. Therefore, the subject in the plot and the subject of the narrative travel in a parallel track. The subject in a plot deals with many issues like the search of the Punto Fijo; a philosophical quest involving and exploring Biblical literature; and a conflict in the metaphysical ideology of 17th century. The process of construction of the story of Roberto's life from his manuscript is the subject of the narrative. This kind of twin narration embedded in a frame reflects self reflexivity as the narration deals with the creation of the narrative itself. The novel *IDB* is said to possess self reflexive narration because the narrator narrates the story of Roberto to the readers with a self conscious style of narration that allows the reader to be aware of the narrative process which the narrator constructs. The reader attains clarity when the narrator reveals in Colophon at the last chapter of the novel that he himself has constructed the fictitious story of Roberto based on Roberto's manuscript. This gives the readers a most crucial hint at the outset that the narrator, has added fictitious events or exaggerated a partly true story to a fictional one.

The narrator tells to the readers: "Finally, if from this story I wanted to produce a novel, I would demonstrate once again that it is impossible to write except by making a palimpsest of a rediscovered manuscript- without ever succeeding in eluding the Anxiety of Influence" (Eco 512).

These are some of the ways to check the conscious narrativity in a self reflexive text like *IDB*:

1. Probing the conventional nature of narrative and the gap that exists between verbal expression and the referent.
2. Incorporating the process of production, construction or composition in the narrative.
3. Imparting constant awareness among the readers that they are reading a fictional work.
4. Posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality and investigating where the text lies among them.
5. Analysing the level of communication between the author and the reader.

The conventional narrative includes linear narration and restriction to the narrator's status of freedom or limitation in his degree of access to the characters and in conveying the story to the readers. Postmodern narration does not confer this mode of traditional narration. The narrator of self reflexive texts always deviates from it. Linear narration is the presentation of the events of the story with coherence from the beginning till the end without altering its sequence and employing synchronicity. The narrator of *IDB* repudiates conventionality, rather purposefully violates to bring the effect of aesthetic illusion. Since the narrator of the novel *IDB* claims that the manuscript of Roberto's life is the premise of his narration and rationale of his story, he fails to present the events in Roberto's diary in an organized manner. The narrator believes that the reason for his failure to present the events in an organized manner is because Roberto has not recorded the incidents in the manuscript coherently. Hence, the narrator of *IDB* faces difficulty in finding out the preceding and succeeding events. The third person narrator of *IDB*, tells his readers: "Or almost- and this is what I would fain tell you about, if only I knew where to begin. For that matter, I have already begun." The narrator further divulges: "The situation is the stuff of a novel, but, once more, where to begin?" (Eco 4, 6). He also tells his readers that Roberto has not provided the happenings of his life more exactly, but has provided very few details only when finds a necessity to do so.

Roberto tells us very little about the sixteen years of his life preceding that summer of 1630. He refers to episodes of the past only when they seem to have some connection with his present on the Daphne, and the chronicler of his turbulent annals must read between the lines of the story . . . And so I must wrest hints from him, as if from a delator. (20)

After his narration of the novel *IDB*, he comments in the last chapter: “THERE. AND WHAT later happened to Roberto I do not know or think it will ever be known. How to draw a novel from a story, so novelistic, when the end- or for that matter, the true beginning- is missing?” (505).

Colophon refers to the statement at the end of the book that gives information about its authorship. Nevertheless Eco, as an author of *IDB*, deftly nominates his postmodern narrator to design the chapter named Colophon which ironically speaks about the formation of the novel, the fictitious story of Roberto. Eco’s narrator enunciates the presence of self reflexive nature of the text by discussing the fictionality in the text in Colophon, where he refers to two hypotheses based on his conjecture about the sources of the manuscript, and how the manuscript belonging to the 17th century has been handed down ultimately to him. Mentioning the details of authorship about the fictitious novel in Colophon emanates the process of creation in the metanarrative text.

The researcher identifies the gap that exists between the verbal expression and the referent. The verbal expression refers to the discourse of the narrator to the readers and the referent is the subject he uses to describe to his readers. The narrator, as the readers know, is recounting the incidents of Roberto’s life, the subject. It is certainly not possible to describe and pass on to the readers exactly, Roberto’s feelings and experiences, in the same manner as Roberto might have felt. This inability and failure in delivering the events by the narrator as done by Roberto create the space between the verbal expression and the referent. One can observe the space between these two entities in the following lines:

It is difficult to reconstruct the actions and feelings of a character surely afire with true love, for you never know whether he is expressing what he feels or what the rules of amorous discourse prescribe in his case- but then for that matter, what do we know of the difference between passion felt and passion expressed, and who can say which has precedence? (Eco 5-6)

These lines evince the stature of double reflexivity and expose one of the features of self reflexivity: the gap between the verbal expression and the referent. At the same time, the narrator corroborates this feature through his own intrusion that shows self reflexivity in the narration.

The processes of production, composition or construction in the narrative have one commonality in meaning that is “creation”. Still there exists a thin layer of difference between them. Production deals with giving or producing something with the available raw material. Composition deals with the manner of organisation of the things. Construction deals with the creation of a subjective ideology. The researcher identifies the processes of production, composition and construction in the text in order to expose its self reflexive nature.

In the novel *IDB*, production in narrative states that this novel of which the narrator speaks about possesses a reliable source from which he has received and is thus passing it on to the readers. Composition in narrative registers the fact that he has created the novel with his style of addendum for narrative pleasure. It makes the readers realize that Eco’s narrator embellishes most of the novel’s incidents while only a part of it has traces of truth that he documents in the manuscript. It also tells us that he has organised the events in Roberto’s life and has presented to the readers in excerpts as the source papers are themselves fragmentary. Construction in the narrative suggests the way in which the narrator understands Roberto’s words, actions, statements, etc. and presents it to the readers. The researcher examines the narrator’s manner of imparting the process of production, composition or construction in the narrative by identifying the apt lines that evince them.

The researcher examines production in these lines: “THUS, WITH UNABASHED conceits, wrote Roberto della Griva presumably in July or August of 1643.” The first chapter begins with a few lines in a font different from that of the succeeding paragraphs. It begins, “I take pride withal in my humiliation ... upon a deserted ship” (Eco 1). These lines are understood by the readers as Roberto’s words and he begins to continue his recounting of the events which are decoded and presented to the readers by the narrator. This exemplifies the production process in the narrative.

The researcher observes composition in the narrative in these lines:

Nor could I elude the childish curiosity of the reader, who would want to know if Roberto really wrote the pages on which I have dwelt far too long. In all honesty, I would have to reply that it is not impossible that someone else wrote them, someone who wanted only to pretend to tell the truth. And thus I would lose all the effect of the novel: where, yes, you pretend to tell true things, but you must not admit seriously that you are pretending. (512-513)

The following lines reveal the process of construction:

Perhaps it is I who am embroidering, from meager clues, but the presence of the absent brother will have its importance in our story. We will find traces of this puerile game . . . But I digress; we have still to establish how Roberto arrived . . . and imagine how it might have happened. (25)

Employing a special technique called zero focalisation inculcates a sustained awareness among the readers that they are reading a fiction. Zero focalisation denotes impossibility to fix a perspective in terms of which the narrator presents the characters or events and situations. In the novel *IDB*, the narrator reveals to his readers about what he is feeling, discusses why he came to certain conclusions and justifies the reasons and logic of his deductions.

In presenting all these ideas, the readers understand that affixing these events from narrator’s perspective does not have certainty as he hardly offers single perception upon his deductions. The researcher has explored that the narrator always gives the possibility of choices and chances more than one for reaching conclusions. This kind of communication makes clear that he is trying to deduce and reconstruct according to his conjectures. This prompts the readers to be conscious of the fictionality in his narration.

For example, in page 92 of *IDB*, the narrator admits that he is not sure of reconstructing its form exactly from Roberto’s description of it to his Lady, as it is surely something never seen before. Also in page 2, the narrator of *IDB* assumes that Roberto must have slept twenty-four hours and that is only an approximate calculation. He computes that it is night when Roberto has woken but he is as if reborn. So it is night again and not night still. He further adds what Roberto’s thought has been. He thinks it is night still because if a day has passed someone should have found him by then. In this instance, the narrator tells the readers what has happened both from his’ and Roberto’s viewpoints thereby not fixing the focalisation which in turn leads the readers to the consciousness in the narration in *IDB*.

Estimating the nature and/ or position of text whether it is fictional or real, becomes necessary for the readers to suspend the disbelief willingly which is created by the narrator. Eco accomplishes the suspension of disbelief among the readers by tagging it in the border between fiction and reality. The narrator clearly distinguishes fiction from reality by exercising the act of narratorial intrusion very frequently. He, apart from narrating the events, breaks the convention of stepping away from the text and speaks out to the reader. He establishes a one to one relationship between himself and the reader where the latter is no longer responsible to the progress of the story yet remains the main subject of the narrator’s attention. This condition enhances the readers’ experience of verisimilitude that in turn sets the whole process of narration to be realised as a conscious proceeding. The researcher contemplates this feature of narrator’s consciousness in narration as self reflexive text. Representing the words of Linda

Hutcheon, Semra Saracoglu in her dissertation mentions: “Since the self reflexive state of the novel denies its existence as a realistic narrative of something outside itself, the reader’s attention is drawn not to the projected world but to the text’s linguistic medium”(Saracoglu 6).

The narrator of *IDB* provides hints to the readers through his discourse that his reports about Roberto are uncertain. This leads the readers toward a dilemma of deciding whether the events he recounts are real or fictional.

The narrator elicits: “And if evidence is to be enlisted in the question of believing or not believing, well, I am assured that an Orange Dove or Flame Dove or, better, a Ptilinopus Victor exists only there- but at the risk of spoiling the whole story, I must add that the orange bird is the male of the species” (Eco 508). In these lines, the narrator indirectly tells the readers about the existence of a species called Orange Dove. He draws the attention of the readers about the fact that its existence is only possible within the story and not in reality thereby gravitating the text towards the linguistic medium rather than the content. Because the readers least bother about orange dove but about the existence or nonexistence of the orange dove.

The researcher thoroughly observes the communication between the narrator and the reader in the novel *IDB*, in many instances, as they recur very often. In this case, the reader is passive and does not respond to the narrator’s observations through any discourse, as the readers are extra-diegetic. But the intrusive third person narrator being diegetic, often comments on the character Roberto’s actions and thought processes. The researcher observes the conscious style of addressing the readers by the intrusive narrator in the lines: “and this, Dear Reader, you never would have dared predict . . .” (492). The narrator’s conversational tone representing the readers is more apparent in: “Let us try to imagine, then, that . . .” and “Let us imagine the Dutch geographers leafing through . . .” (506, 507). In both these instances, he addresses the reader by the word “us”. One can infer that, the narrator by calling the readers -“us”, he tries to engage the readers to be involved in the part of his narration.

The researcher has thus examined, identified and evidenced the characteristic features of the text that exhibit self reflexivity, in the novel *IDB*. Through the embodiment of a story with a self reflexive narrative structure, the author effectuates the narcissistic narration that actively engages the readers in the fictional narrative world. Through this activity, the text informs the readers about its own creative process. The readers cannot imbibe the narcissistic nature of the text without being involved in part of the narration, be it as an active or passive participation, although the readers in this case are passive. Therefore the narrator includes the readers, both by inviting them into the narrative frame and by assuming himself the role of the reader. The narrator allows the constant provision of the text’s exposure of its self referential nature by violating the aesthetic distance in the reception of the readers of the novel *IDB*. This proves the self reflexive status of the narration in the text *IDB*.

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