John Barth’s *The Floating Opera* as a Postmodern Novel

Nooshin Elahipanah¹, Parisa Rostami Balan²*

¹Assistant Professor in English Literature, Semnan University, Semnan, IRAN
²*Corresponding author M.A English Literature, Semnan University, Semnan, IRAN

**Abstract:** John Barth’s later works, unlike his early novels, have always been analyzed and investigated by the critics. The purpose of this thesis is to take Barth’s first novel *The Floating Opera* under consideration in order to highlight the ways in which postmodern techniques of writing concerning Fragmentation, Metafiction, Intertextuality, Black humour are employed by the novelist to render him as a first American postmodern writer and his novel *The Floating Opera* is the basis of postmodern literature.

**Keywords:** John Barth, Postmodernism, Fragmentation, Metafiction, Intertextuality, Black humour

I. Introduction

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live” says American author Joan Didion. We love stories because they are a great part of our life and they build our communicative world. Stories make us meditate and help us understand each other better. They widen our imagination and lead us to find common ground and to share common experiences. They take us beyond the reality and give us a sense of continuity and coherence. Storytelling and the world of story is so sweet, interesting and magical that drives so many writers, critics and philosophers to talk about it and John Barth is one of those writers that communicate by storytelling. He had chosen novel as a best genre and postmodernism as a best technique of writing to open the world of novelty and creativity in literature. In this novel we have characters that suffer from pain of being; they try to tell us their life story to alleviate their tensions. The pain they bear is larger than life for them. Barth used postmodern as a movement to protest against the situation they are trapped in and he used postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, metafiction, intertextuality and black humor to show this affliction better. Therefore, the characters he used, the style he chose, and the techniques he introduced all hand in hand help the reader to feel the world better and communicate with that effectively and logically.

In fact postmodernism is a new style of writing or a new movement in literature that initially emerged in novel during the Second World War, and became the dominant mode of literature between 1960-1990. There are so many catastrophes during this period that lead to alienation and lack of communication, as Barry Lewis notes “the killing of Kennedy, and the death threat against Rushdie for writing The Satanic Verses, and fall of The Berlin Wall left world uneasy with rapid technological change and ideological uncertainties” (qtd. in Sim 121), and the consequence as Jameson contends, is an incomplete understanding of the world. “The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by a sense of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the “crisis” of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism.” (Jamson 30), sense of the end noticed by Jamson leads to what he called postmodernism, the movement arises owing to lack of understanding the world as it is, lack of understanding the others and lack of knowledge on universe. It is an expression of and response to the profound uncertainty of late-twentieth century faced to, but the emerging writers of this decade tried to make the situation better and conduct a new way of communication with one another and with readers. As Bakhtin believes the ultimate goal of man is communication, so postmodern writers conform to this rule, their ultimate goal is communication but communicate in a new way.

John Barth started to use techniques of postmodernism in his literary products. His first postmodern novel that was influenced by these techniques was *The Floating Opera*. As Josh Toth believe “*The Floating Opera* might readily be identified as the first work of American postmodernism” (129). And Ziegler declares “it is an early postmodern text about the son who instrumentalises his father in order to tell his own life story” (20); therefore we can call *The Floating Opera* as the first postmodern American novel trying to make change in the world of literature.

II. Fragmentation in *The Floating Opera*

Opposed to traditional novel which is circular and linear, in postmodern novel the reader faces special plot pattern which is un-circular and non-linear and it is called fragmentated narrative. Fragmentation has led many literary scholars to view postmodernism as John Hawkes does in his criticism. He argues that: “When the writer began to
write he assumed that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme. Certainly many subsequent authors have done their best to sledgehammer these four literary cornerstones into oblivion. Either plot is pounded into small slabs of event and circumstance, characters disintegrate into a bundle of twitching desires, settings are little more than transitory backdrops, or themes become so attenuated that it is often comically inaccurate to say that certain novels are about such-and-such”  

(qtd. in Sim 126)  

In fragmented narratives, we might have beginning, middle and end, but these components are combined together without any chronological order. The narrative might start in the middle of the story, getting flash back and flash forward. In general, fragmented narratives can be thought of as linear narratives told in a nonlinear format, so in fragmentation we do not see the plot in chronological order, in other words all he faces are fragmentary events, and the plot pattern is like a puzzle going to be solved in future. The next factor postmodern writer ignores or overlooks is character. During the Second World War, the world faces the chaos and destruction; therefore, the man witnessed crisis of identity of human being (ethnic, social, cultural and sexual) which leads to fragmented character. These fragmented characters seek their identities because they are entangled in the world with so many unanswered questions. The next two factors postmodern writers ignored could be setting and theme, both of which play a tiny role in the process of storytelling. The story could take place in anywhere and in any time and the theme could be anything.

Postmodern writers depicted the world as fragmented, troubled, having already undergone countless disasters beyond understanding. Plot, character, setting and theme for them are not important at all, but the pivotal responsibility of these writers is to transfer ideas or dialogues with readers to perceive each other. Barth is one of those writers who is interested in fragmentation, his novel *The Floating Opera* was written with special plot pattern without chronological order, it has beginning, middle and end but it needs readers intelligence to find out where is the beginning, where is the middle and where is the end. The next factor leading this novel to fragmentation is related to special structure postmodern novelist used in his work like using so many short sentences with capital letters, using so many exclamation marks and so many dashes, and many signs that show this novel as fragmented. Another fragmented structure occurs when the author uses the picture of balloon in the middle of the book without any explanation, or uses odd advertisement in the book with capital letters in an unusual format.  

*The Floating Opera* as a postmodern novel uses fragmented sentences and structure to indicate how the mind of the writer is busy with daily and unexpected matters that forbid the writer to concentrate well enough. By this technique he aims at directing attention to the fact that one cannot perceive the world in the 20th century by special and temporal factors. and wants to tell the reader it is not important where you were born, where you were grown up, in what time you live now and who you are but the most important thing is that you have a great message for this world, because you are special, so you have to take part in communication and you have to transfer your ideas to others in a way to change the world.

**III. Metafiction in The Floating Opera**  

Another way of communication of postmodern writer with his readers is through metafiction, this unconventional and experimental technique rejects the traditional way of storytelling by writing fiction about fiction instead of creating real story and the name was coined metafiction in 1970 by William H. Gass in an essay entitled *Philosophy and the Form of Fiction* and he believes that like mathematics, logic and ethics literature has its own language needing progress and change. In his opinion, a story using metafictional devices tries so much to encourage readers to see phenomena differently from what they are used to and finally wish for a greater awareness of self; through the use of language. Patricia Waugh started to borrow and modify Gass’s ideas and introduced a new definition for metafiction, she believes that: “Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.” (Waugh 2) Many metafictional writers do not emphasize on the importance of literature, but the important thing for them is the ultimate impact of literature on their readers, this technique emphasizes on literature as a tool to impact on its readers and is going to teach something to the reader, so a metafictional work is reader-oriented and the writer tries to share his own experiences with the reader. He takes the reader with himself to create special time for him and make a change.  

John Barth is one of those writers interested in metafiction because he likes to use techniques which are new and so many people cannot use. In his essay *Literature of Exhaustion* he compares the Pop artists of the Sixties with the acrobats who impacted on him as a child, Barth believes that “he is on the whole more impressed by the jugglers and acrobats at Baltimore's old Hippodrome... genuine virtuosi doing things that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can do” (66). For Barth literature does the same for him, he prefers to use a special techniques in his works that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can use.

In this novel we have a fiction about fiction. Barth tells us a story, used his intelligence to talk about the urbiculture by new look to the world where he is living. In this novel, he reminds his readers, his characters and himself that
he exists and the author is not dead at all and he poses the question on his authority as an author, not only he believes that the author is not dead at all but he also believes in the birth of the reader. He believes that the novel is alive until the reader, reads it, thinks about it and discusses, so it is the most important event for John Barth. He used some of the characteristics of metafiction identified by Victoria Orlowski in his novel such as: “1) the violation of narrative levels, specifically intrusions in the narrative to comment on the writing and involvement of the author with the fictional characters. 2) directly addressing the reader 3) Openly questioning how narrative assumptions and conventions transform and filter reality…. 4) rejection of conventional plot” (Orlowski 65). These four steps are crucial to have a metafictional novel and John Barth’s novel The Floating Opera conforms to these steps. First of all, we see the violation of narrative levels, specifically involvement of the author with the fictional characters. In so many parts of the novel Barth, talks about the process and techniques of writing a story and, the reader thinks that Barth is trying to teach his readers how to write a novel. The next metafictional technique occurs when the writer directly addressing the reader, sometimes he as a writer addresses the reader and sometimes as a main character of the story touches the reader and reveals his secrets for him. The third metafictional technique the writer uses is when he openly questions how narrative assumptions and conventions transform and filter reality, the reader of this novel has this question in his mind that does this novel show reality or is it a fictional one? And then he comes to this conclusion that the novel is a fiction about fiction and he is so far from the real world, this novel is not real but a miniature of life trying to make the reader aware of the universe he belongs to. Finally, the last metafictional technique in this novel is rejection of conventional plot. Here the reader does not see the plot in a traditional form, so he is not expected to see incidents chronologically.

IV. Intertextuality in The Floating Opera (pastiche)

Intertextuality is the next common term used in contemporary literature especially in postmodernism and it means a text referring to other texts or borrowed information from other texts. The term was coined for the first time by Julia Kristeva Bulgarian French philosopher, literary critic and essayist in her essay entitled Word, Dialogue and Novel: “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of inter-subjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (Kristeva 37), as she believes there is a complex relationship exists between one text with other texts so a text is never born in isolation but it imitates from previous canons, and she explains that there are two kinds of relationships going on whenever we read a text, she called the first one horizontal axis (relationship between reader and text) and vertical axis (relationship of one text with other text). “Horizontal axis (subject–addressee) and vertical axis (text–context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read” (Kristeva 37).

Gérard Genette developed Kristeva’s vertical axis phenomenon and believes there exist a strong relationship between text B to text A, and the reader witnesses the involvement of these 2 texts with each other so he called the new text hypertext or B and called earlier text hypotext or A, ultimately, every hypertext “can be read for itself and in its relation to its hypotext” (Genette 397).

Now you may ask how the writer uses intertextuality in his work and with what literary elements? The answer is by the help of allusion, quotation, pastiche, translation, claque and parody the writer created intertextual work, and he could use these techniques intentionally or unintentionally, it depends on the writer’s aim and the text’s final goal.

One of the most important key terms used in vertical axis as a part of intertextuality is pastiche which means borrowing various ideas from previous literary texts or previous literary styles and binding them together and creating a new literary work with new style full of new ideas. The writer uses pastiche in his work because he praises the work he imitates.

John Barth is one of those writers who used intertextuality in his postmodern novel very well; he used this technique both intentionally and unintentionally. Using horizontal axis is unintentional, so the writer used it without any preperation and it is the reader’s job to find the relationship of hypertext to hypotext to find out the meaning and in vertical axis the writer used the terms intentionally to communicate with previous masterpieces.

In fact, the main subject that developed in The Floating Opera is rejection of suicide. Barth used the idea of suicide discussed by Camus in both existentialist and postmodern phases unintentionally. When critics asked John Barth whether he was influenced by Camus’s discussion of suicide in The Myth of Sisyphus or not he replied: “There certainly may be similarities between them, but it didn't color my work because I haven't read The Myth of Sisyphus. I believe Camus says the first question that a thoughtful man has to ask himself is why he is going to go on, then make up his mind whether to blow his brains out or not; at the end of The Floating Opera my man decides he won't commit suicide because there's no more reason to stop living than to persist in it” (John J. Enck and John Barth: 12), so John Barth confesses that he has never read Albert Camus’s The Myth of Sisyphus, and he never tries to use this work as a hypotext, so without any preperation and unconsciously he created an intertextual literary work. The next intertextual technique introduced by Kristeva and used by John Barth in his novel the Floating Opera is vertical axis (text–context), but this time he uses this term consciously and with full
awareness of the hypotext. He creates new ideas in his novel as a hypertext, so he uses pastiche and quotations to make difference. John Barth as an American novelist, started to borrow some rules from British novelist Laurence Stern. He used *Tristram Shandy* as a hypotext and revived a new story named *The Floating Opera*. Actually, the form is the same but he changed the content of Tristram Shandy to something modern. He modernized *Tristram Shandy* to create *The Floating Opera*.

First of all let us talk anything about the beginning of the novel *Tristram Shandy*. The main character narrates his life story but he cannot explain anything simply, he cannot affirm his being and he does not know how to explain his birth from beginning; indeed it seems to him almost like a doom-laden end. This situation continues until chapter three and Tristram tries so much to accompany the reader with him to create a kind of dialogic relationship between the reader and himself, so it is good idea for John Barth to borrow this companionship of reader with the writer to tell his story. The next technique that Laurence Stern used in his novel in which John Barth was interested, and borrows from him is visual digressions in *Tristram Shandy* which consists of graphic jokes like empty or marble-designed pages, a whole chapter is composed of only one word *Alas*, pages of lines and dots and dashes only. He shows this interest by using so many short sentences, the picture of balloon in the middle of the book, using so many exclamation marks and dashes, big letters in middle of some pages as well as using odd advertisements in the book.

John Barth imitated from Laurence Stern to make a change and to communicate with the previous writers because from Barth’s perspective the previous writers did their job very well and now it is the job of this generation to introduce these canons to its reader’s in order to produce better literary works.

### V. Black Humour in *The Floating Opera*

The term black humor was coined by the surrealist theoretician André Breton in 1935 “to designate a subgenre of comedy and satire in which laughter arises from cynicism and skepticism. Black humor is often a satire on the topic of death” (Sharma 30). It consists of group of writers from 1960-1970 whose works are characterized by feelings of alienation, despair and emptiness presented within darkly comic setting. The Columbia Encyclopedia defines it as: “Black humor, in literature, drama, and film, grotesque or morbid humor used to express the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox, and cruelty of the modern world. Ordinary characters or situations are usually exaggerated far beyond the limits of normal satire or irony. Black humor uses devices often associated with tragedy and is sometimes equated with tragic farce”. This term used in postmodern literature to express cruelty and absurdity of contemporary world and it is a direct way of showing man’s suffering. As the name suggests it have pessimistic view toward life; therefore, it portrays the horrors of the disaster the universe face to during war time and after that.

John Barth’s novel *The Floating Opera* is a good example of black humor when Todd Andrews depicted absurdity of life by deciding to commit suicide and the term emphasized when he mentions the common events of life in a grotesque manner. It is called black humor when existence precedes essence and the questions which call our attention remain unanswered. It is called black humor when the common matters of everyday life are satirized and the meaning of friendship changes. John Barth uses everyday life to fun of it and the events which could bring happiness and solemnity bring disaster.

In this novel all the characters are in search of identity, they suffer from lack of identity because they do not know where they belong to and from where they come and to where they will go. Todd Andrews experiences alienation and suffers from lack of identity, so he wants to commit suicide, but he is not successful because he cannot decide between life and death. Jane and Mack suffer from lack of identity, so they try to get closer to Todd to ameliorate their feelings and Jeannine (the illegal child of Jane and Todd) searches for her real identity; thus, he started to ask question incessantly to find the truth. Another important factor that marks this work as an extraordinary black humorist work is that the entire novel is like a joke since Todd Andrews remains alive after so many reasons of why he wanted to commit suicide. In so many parts the reader thinks that Todd is steadfast in doing so but when he comes closer to the climax of the story the reader is shocked because he thinks Todd is going to make fun of him. But as Todd tells his readers, he wanted to create a story to make his readers think and communicate by him.

Another trace of black humor occurs when Todd decides to pay his hotel bill one day at a time rather than monthly because of chronic heart disease (whose every beat might be its last). In fact he lives more than thirty-five years with his heart condition, so this kind of cynicism makes the reader laugh at such a character. Janoff argues: “*The Floating Opera* is filled with superbly comic moments, sometimes gentle, sometimes coarse but always laced with cynicism, irony and a sprinkling of puns for flavor. The most far-reaching humor, though, is undeniably black. Behind the irrepressible cynicism of Todd Andrews' facile comic mask lie an awareness of physical reality which to the black humorist means irrationality, despair and the closeness of death. In The Floating Opera Barth expresses his feeling for this reality in dark yet relatively muted tones, not quite allowing free rein to his despairing vision. (55)

Todd lives with the sense of cynicism, this is so clear when the night before of his decision on committing suicide he makes this entry in his notebook: I. Nothing has intrinsic value. Things assume value only in terms of certain
ends. II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately arbitrary. That is, the ends in terms of which things assume value are themselves ultimately irrational. (Barth: 238)

A few hours later, ‘without a shred of regret,’ Todd Andrews changed his logic to this conclusion: III. There is, therefore, no ultimate "reason" for valuing anything, including life. IV. Living is action in some form. There is no reason for action in any form. V. There is, then, no "reason" for living. (Barth 243)

So the novel starts with the idea of death and committing suicide but soon he ignores it, this cynicism on the world around shows pessimism of Todd Andrews about the universe. He is a hopeless character waiting for his death and this hopelessness does not come from nothing but it originates from the situation and the time Todd was born and experienced tragic and catastrophic events.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion “the critical deconstruction that leads to the discovery of the literary, rhetorical nature of the philosophical claim to truth is genuine enough and cannot be refuted: literature turns out to be the main topic of philosophy and the model for the kind of truth to which it aspires” (De Mann 115), thus we cannot ignore the importance of literature and literary works in today’s world. They are a part of our everyday life and they help us think better. Now it is time to be more cautious about the world around. John Barth as an American novelist of the 20th century depicts a man having all the characteristics of this century, he is not precisely like us but so similar to us. Intellectually this complex literally work makes us communicate well and helps us enter the world of a man with so many uncertainties. By entering the mind of the character, the reader can evaluate characteristics of Todd and other characters better. The reader should be careful enough that he is not going to judge the characters; he is going to get familiar with the modern man of 20th century and with internal status of a man living in this time. This work is example of existentialism, so we can experience the nihilistic attitudes of Todd. This novel is called modern novel with Bakhtin’s ideas toward a subject. In one word this research answers why this piece of writing is called novel and how it is categorized as a postmodern novel. As indicated before, we have death of traditional novel, but what we have, is modern novel with new implications, the novel in its process of becoming is started a new kind of narration that tells us a story. It is a story about story. The important thing here is the special way of narration. Finally, what make this novel special are techniques Barth used as the cooperation of the reader in reading process and revelation of meaning.

References
