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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unreliable Narrators Suffering from Trauma in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*

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Abstract: This is a comparative study of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*. The main focus is on the role of trauma in the creation of unreliable narrators. Both Sartre and Murdoch have witnessed the horrors of World War II and it seems that their narratives are affected by such a terrible event. The characters look traumatized and suffer from the burden of the past which has never left them alone. In other words, past events have formed their identity and have rewritten their personality under the situation of World War II. Here, with the help of Wayne C. Booth's theory of unreliable narrator, the narrators of the selected novels are scrutinized at the social and political contexts of the novels. Accordingly, considering this context and its consequent trauma, the research tries to reveal the presence and function of the unreliable narrators in the selected literary works.

Keywords: Narration; Unreliable Narrator; Trauma; Booth; Sartre; Murdoch.

Introduction

A novel is a "polyphonic genre" since it comprises different types of truths coexisting within its lines and pages (Nicol, 2004: 97). Accordingly, a novel provides a rich field for going down into its deep layers and is a suitable genre to consider two kinds of literary criticism for its study. Here, the research uses narratology, specifically "unreliable narrator", to do a comparative study of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* at the historical context of World War II. Both Sartre and Murdoch have witnessed the horrors of such a tragic event and wrote some of their works at its time or after it. When war happens, it affects everything from single entities in the environment to the life of human beings and their identities. It may even change the attitude

and perspective of people toward the world and life.

Both Sartre and Murdoch have felt the suffering of war victims and have a sort of a veiled political agenda in their writings. Besides, the moment of trauma depends on a wound that "gets the past to be repeated in the present" and creates a "linked time of trauma" in which the traumatic subject is trapped to re-live and re-enact the circumstances of his/ her original wound (Gantea, 2015: 58). Trauma restructures the form of the narration and creates characters that cannot put behind their impossible histories (Najita, 2006: 19). Considering such a point, the research looks for the wounds of invisible bullets of World War II in Sartre's and Murdoch's selected

fictions. The moment of trauma depends on a wound that “gets the past to be repeated in the present” (Prince, 2012: 4). The research believes in the fact that improvisational power of the Second World War causes a circulation of social energy which leads to unreliability in the character’s narrative self-fashioning. In other words, the war produces salutary anxiety whose effects can be traced at the level of the people’s identity and narrative; that is, unknowingly, individuals are manipulated by the improvised nature of the war’s plot and are directed into being unreliable narrators in their narration.

2. Narratology and Unreliable Narrator

Narratology is “the study of form and functioning of the narrative” (ibid). The origin of narratology is mostly associated with Russian formalism and French structuralism considering a narrative as a systematic construction. Accordingly, structural narratologists are interested in the way that the narrative discourse puts a story into the form of an organized structure of a plot figuring out the grammar of narratives (ibid). A popular formula among narratologists presents narrative as “a combination of story and discourse” (Abbott, 2019: 16). In this classical structuralist formulation by Seymour Chatman, the narrative is shown as a kind of text with story and discourse, “the raw material of narrative and how that material is presented” or better to say the “content plane” and the “expression plane”, as its main components (Kiernan-Johnson, 2012: 90). In addition to such formulation, there is a common definition of a narrative text as a text in which a story is told by a narrative agent, a narrator (Bal, 2009: 15). Rimmon-Kenan (2011: 2) also argues that narrative fiction is “the narration of a succession of fictional events.”

An unreliable narrator is one of the different types of narrators. The history of unreliable narration, as put forward by Ansgar Nünning (D’hoker and Martens, 2008: 57), goes back to

the end of eighteenth-century and is not born with the modern fiction. Some critics assert that it has been brought forward, at least implicitly, by Richardson’s epistolary novels and his use of multi-perspectives (ibid). In some circumstances, a narrator may lose his credibility due to some discrepancies or contradictions in his words or deeds. Therefore, this unreliable narrator will give a distorted picture of reality because of many different things such as being obsessed with certain ideas (Fludrenik, 2009: 27). He may reveal himself as naïve, immoral, and dishonest having no understanding of the story in contrast to the reader who gets a clearer image of events by reading between the lines (ibid). Accordingly, his trustworthiness is undermined by the events that are deduced from the narration (Mcquillan, 2000: 329). The narratee might wonder about the narrator’s failure to respect the norms of relevance, truth, and reliability (Currie, 2017: 67). Wayne C. Booth was the first critic who discovered and introduced this type of narrator. He links the unreliable narrator to the concept of the implied author indicating that a reader realizes a narrator unreliable by noticing the conflicts between the narrator’s and the implied author’s ideas. The discourse of unreliable narration gives the sense that the implied author and the reader are communicating behind the narrator’s back (Fludrenik, 2009: 27).

Booth (1983: 155) states that there is a variety of narrators depending on the kind and amount of interpretation allowed and the direct relating of matters in the scene of the story. He provides the starting point for the study of the unreliable narrators and its typology and describes the characters he wants to discuss with the help of some terms such as “unreliable”, “untrustworthy”, “inconsistency” or unconscious, and “fallible” (Olson, 2003: 95-96). He states:

I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accord with the norms of the work

(which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not.

If [the narrator] is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed.

It is most often a matter of what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him.

Sometimes it is almost impossible to infer whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible. (1983: 158-160)

These definitions indicate that Booth has different types of unreliability in mind. "Unreliable" and "untrustworthy" demonstrate the deviation of the narrator from the standard norms implicit in the text and, as a result, cannot be trusted (Olson, 2003: 96). In contrast, "inconscience" and "fallible" suggest that the narrator has a mistaken perception of herself or the story-world (ibid). Booth explains that a narrator might be unreliable about either "facts (the axis of events) or values (the axis of ethics)" and describes the communication and collusion between the reader and the implied author which is happening behind the back of the unreliable narrator (Phelan and Martin, 1999: 89).

Since the 1980s, one of the hot topics in the field of narratology is "the relation between form and history" and the contextualist approaches have criticized different narrative theories for neglecting the socio-historical context (Hansen et al., 2017: 3). Therefore, this research studies the issue of trauma at the context of World War II to scrutinize its traumatic impact on the formation of the unreliable narrators in the selected novels.

3. Unreliable Narrators Suffering from Trauma in Sartre's *Nausea* and Murdoch's *Under the Net*

"Traumatic narratives" are defined by Vickroy as the "fictional narratives that help readers reach traumatic experience" (2002: 1). She (x) believes that "trauma narratives ... are

personalized responses to this century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche." The roots of the contemporary trauma fiction can be traced at transmitting not only the characters' trauma but also representing the "sites, motives, and repercussions of cultural oppression" (Wood Anderson, 2012: 8). Accordingly, Horvitz (2000: 18) contends that the authors are "committed to bearing witness to oppression" and that they "share an interest in representing political ideologies of power in realist fiction."

In Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, the characters, specifically the narrator himself, Antoine Roquentin, seem to be suffering from trauma in their personal lives as they look troubled based on Roquentin's presentation of them and the post-war society in which they are living. He begins his diary stating that "something has happened to me: I can't doubt that anymore. It came as an illness does, like an ordinary certainty, not like anything obvious" (13). It settled inside him so low that he is persuaded that it was a false alarm and he is all right but now it has started blossoming again. From the very beginning, he introduces his unpleasant feeling inside which he calls "sweet disgust" and "a sort of nausea" (22). Although such nausea is mostly considered by critics as an existentialist issue related to Sartre's philosophy, it can be also looked through a new perspective being a trauma he is haunted by. When his nausea happens, he is disconnected from the world and things do not make sense to him anymore.

Another issue related to the idea of trauma which is shown in the narration of *Nausea* is that of alienation of the characters. Repeatedly, Roquentin expresses his loneliness and solitude throughout the novel. For example, at one scene when he sees a couple at the café Mably, he states:

These young people amaze me; drinking their coffee, they tell clear, plausible stories. If you ask them what they did yesterday, they don't

get frustrated; they tell you all about it in a few words. If I were in their place, I'd start stammering. It's true that for a long time now nobody has bothered how I spend my time. When you live alone, you even forget what it is to tell a story: plausibility disappears at the same time as friends. You let events flow by too: you suddenly see people appear who speak and then go away; you plunge into stories of which you can't make head or tail; you'd make a terrible witness (17-18).

He shows his loneliness here in his inability to communicate with others and to tell his story due to no one caring about him and his solitude. He compares himself with the couple who seem to represent normal people that can express themselves in just a few words. But he has lived lonely for a long time with no one bothering him about his situation. He looks like a stranger in the land of the unknown where he cannot use words to understand others. This is one of the reasons why there is a sense in his narration that he is traumatized. Also, the unreliability of his narration can be found at this part since he states that "when you live alone, you even forget what it is to tell a story: plausibility disappears at the same time as friends" (ibid). Here, Roquentin confesses to his inability of plausible narration which he relates to his way of living alone. He also states that "you let events flow by too" (ibid); that is, some incidents might be unconsciously neglected by such a person that leads to unreliable narration.

He sees such misery in other characters around him too. For instance, he sees a couple in the street where the woman is "pulling a man by his sleeve" while talking in "a small quick voice" (44) but the man pushes her away and leaves her without even looking back. She shouts "'Charles, please, you know what I told you? Charles, come back, I've had enough, I'm too miserable!'" (ibid). When Roquentin gets close to her, he identifies her. It is Lucie but a different one since she looks transfigured because of that sorrow. When he gets close to

her, he wonders "how can I believe that this burning flesh, this face radiant with sorrow? ... I pass slowly in front of her. Her eyes stare at me, but she doesn't seem to see me; she looks quite helpless in her suffering" (ibid). It seems that she is choking and drowning in her suffering and does not notice things around her as if she is living her trauma and is completely detached from the outside world. As she starts groaning, Roquentin finds the cause of her trauma and suffering from outside, from the boulevard, rather than herself. In other words, society is suffering from the trauma of World War II that is touching its dwellers' souls. In one sense, the characters are in a land which is very similar to the setting in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; that is, they are stuck in the limbo of the war.

As it was shown, throughout the story, Roquentin is repeatedly haunted by nausea of the war. He is nauseated by the thought of his existence as if his troubled traumatized self causes such an unpleasant feeling in him. At first, he separates nausea from himself saying "I can feel it *over there* on the wall, on the braces, everywhere around me. Is one with the café, it is I who am inside *it*" (35) but, later on, he asserts that "the Nausea hasn't left me and I don't believe it will leave me for quite a while; but I am no longer putting up with it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is me" (182). In other words, in the end, he has become one with his nausea and finds it in his troubled self.

In addition to the points mentioned, Roquentin has some difficulties with the language and use of words which reveals the trauma he is struggling with deep inside. He declares that "I do not need to speak in flowery language. I am writing to understand certain circumstances. I must beware of literature. I must let my pen on, without searching for words" (85). Due to his condition, he talks of his "struggling against words" (185) which shows his inability of proper communication to narrate things that makes the narratee more

assured of the idea of his unreliable narration. He mentions the idea that,

When you are living, nothing happens. The settings change, people come in and go out, that's all. There are never any beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, it is an endless, monotonous addition. Now and then you do a partial sum. ... That's living. But when you tell about life, everything changes; only it's a change nobody notices: the proof of that is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be such things as true stories; events take place one way and we recount them the opposite way. (61-62)

At this part, Roquentin compares 'living' with 'the recount of it' concluding that there is no real event happening when there is living while the incidents get their meanings in the stories. Besides this, he argues about the falsity of the narration of events; that is, the stories do not recall the true narratives. He asserts the fact that the person telling the story recounts it in "the opposite way" from its real order in life. Accordingly, the narratives cannot be trusted since the way of narrating does not reflect the true image of the real-life and, therefore, they are not reliable. This can also be applied in Roquentin's diary as he is recounting the events happening to him but, as he states, it might not include the 'true stories' as he is telling his story life. In other words, he is admitting his unreliable narration once again in a different way.

Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* is another novel in which some traces of trauma and unreliability can be noticed. In most of Murdoch's novels, 'past' has a form of haunting presence through the uncanny and the nostalgia; that is, the dilemma of nostalgia, specially "the longing for an idealized past of innocence and the realization of and the escape from the traumatic experiences of the past", is represented by "the ambivalence in the hero's relationship with the past, his efforts to escape from it and his constant adherence to it"

(Szoke, 2016: 22). Conradi (2001: 342) argues that Murdoch's experiences at the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Office and her relationship with Elias Canetti and Franz Baermann Steiner affected her theory on the Holocaust, her idea of ethics, guilt, and religion, and her view of "the evil of the world." In "The Idea of Perfection", Murdoch (1997: 326) herself refers to the educative nature of literature stating that it can function as "an education in how to picture and understand human situations" and, therefore, it might help make sense of the past and its trauma.

In "Against Dryness", she gives a critique of post-war period asserting that it is "a scientific and anti-metaphysical age in which dogmas, images, and precepts of religion have lost much of their power" (1997: 287). Although Murdoch's fictions use the Holocaust as an instrument to grasp the common people's conditions of the post-war, she opts to illustrate it as a cultural and historical trauma in her novels (Szoke, 2016: 27). She believes in the educative force of literature and art in the sense that the task of literature is to provide "a true portrait of the prevailing human situation through rescuing humankind through the post-war moral chaos" (ibid). Therefore, the memory becomes an essential element in most of her works since it can erase some of the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust with the help of art and its literary figures. Her characters must come to terms with the heavy burden of this traumatic past and its very fruits haunting them.

The characters of Murdoch's *Under the Net* suffer from the lack of communication, misunderstanding, and loneliness suggesting the otherness of people. For example, Jake shows his unhappiness of coming back to London talking of burying his "head so deep in dear London that I can forget that I have ever been away" (7). He says that he can personify with Paris, unlike London, which looks like a goddess to him, "arriving in Paris always

causes me pain, even when I have been away for only a short while. It is a city which I never fail to approach with expectation and leave with disappointment ... Paris remains for me still an unresolved harmony. It is the only city which I can personify" (188). Finn and Jake seem to be shut in their lives sitting alone in the middle of pavement as if the whole world is reduced to their zone of loneliness and everything out there is blurry. Furthermore, the novel portrays different forms of the relationships of couples, friends, and family members which are doomed to fail in establishing a permanent bond and, therefore, separate. For example, there are some couples such as Jake and Madge and Jake and Anna who do not succeed in cherishing their relation and are separated. Jake also loses his close friends and companions, Hugo and Finn, and is rejected by David Gellman when he goes to him since he tells him that he cannot stand the idea of "two wrecks living together" (29). Or, Anna and Sadie are sisters but their sisterhood is not a close bond as Anna remarks that "she's my sister. We put up with each other" (44). They keep their distance from each other shutting themselves in their solitary worlds.

Jake is a lonely character striving to escape from his solitudes as he continually searches for some kind of relationship with different people such as Anna, Hugo, and Mars, the star dog. Although he tries to be involved with people, he does not act as a caring person to keep his connection with others safe. Jake is the most traumatized character in *Under the Net*. When he hears the name of Anna, he says that "I was still in some pain from the name that Finn had uttered. But in the midst of the pain, a queer melody had been set going" (31). Although some years have passed since his last encounter with her and he is no longer in touch with her, he suffers from his past memories with his beloved. But, with this pain comes joy, the joy, the actually masochistic joy, as he wants to be alone and think about her. Besides, Jake defines his world in the sense that "I

would be at pains to put my universe in order and set it ticking when suddenly it would burst again into a mess of the same poor pieces, and Finn and I be on the run" (ibid). This way, he shows his miserable life in which troubles happen over and over again not letting him make a solid and peaceful order. This is Murdoch's method of giving a portrait of a post-war society in which people are still struggling to bring back peace and morality into their lives.

Later on, Jake adds the point that "I say my universe, not ours, because I sometimes feel that Finn has very little inner life" (ibid) and that he follows Jake because he has a complex and differentiated life while he misses his own. Jake counts Finn as "an inhabitant of my universe, and cannot conceive that he has one containing me, and this arrangement seems restful for both of us" (ibid). It shows his solipsism since he asks the universe and its people be at his command but is disappointed when it does not come true. His description also proves to be wrong as the narratee sees that Finn comes up with better ideas when they are in trouble and, finally, leaves Jake to follow his dream. Jake calls him a truthful man which is true about him and confesses to his own unreliability by noting that "subtle people, like myself, can see too much ever to give a straight answer. Aspects have always been my trouble" (ibid). Accordingly, from the beginning, he admits to the fact that his narration is not trustworthy. For instance, he says that Madge would expect him to make a scene because of her decision and he is much reluctant and not energetic to do so. But when he faces her in person, he persists and begs her to let them stay in her apartment but she asks him not to make a scene and just evacuate her place that same day. He even admits to his lie when he stated that he lived "practically rent-free" in her house while he had been living there "entirely rent-free" (23). Or, when he goes to Anna for help, he lies when she implores what has brought him to her and says that he just wanted

to see her while the narratee knows his true intention. He says his second lie to Anna when he answers her that he has no place to stay for the night calling it “my first lie” (49) while the narratee already knows he has lied before.

Jake has experienced suffering and trauma so much that he knows “how exasperating it is of other people to put themselves in positions where you have to injure them” (21). He does the same thing by not taking the role of his life and just relying on others to help him out and look after him. By having this attitude, he puts himself in a fragile position and is repeatedly hurt. As Dave points out Jake just thinks about himself while “precisely it is not to think of your soul, but to think of other people” (29). Being self-concerned, he misunderstands many of the characters’ intentions and mostly interprets their actions as if they are scheming behind his back and, as a result, gets involved in a series of strange events and awkward decisions.

As it was mentioned, it is not just Jake who is suffering in this novel rather there are many other traumatized characters. Jake introduced Sadie as a person who “simply couldn’t be telling the truth. I knew from of old that Sadie was a notorious liar and would tell any falsehood to procure herself even a quite temporary advantage” (77). He does not believe her claim that Hugo is pursuing her calling him a frightful man since the Hugo he knows is not forward with women and is mostly interested in “the quiet home-keeping types” (ibid). He assumes that Sadie has come up with this story due to her jealousy towards Hugo’s love for Anna. Based on the narratee’s experience, he is not a reliable man to judge others since he does not have a true knowledge of people and their desires. He describes Hugo as an independent man with a great personality and great ideas. His portrait of Hugo does not match with what Sadie claims until he is met at the hospital. There, he confesses to his deep love for Sadie and that he had acted like a stocker even bothering her at one night. It

shows how desperate Hugo is and, like Jake, he is suffering from the trauma of solitude in his life.

As it can be noticed, in *Under the Net*, the characters are suffering from the trauma of past as if the heaviness of the effects of World War II is on their shoulders and there is no escape from it. Creating such a post-war situation, Murdoch shows her characters traumatized dealing with different issues and problems which are the consequences of the past. This trauma also reveals itself in the unreliability of the characters in their narratives since the novel is filled with lies and falsehood. From the first-person protagonist of the novel to some minor characters such as Sammy, people are lying to each other and the reader.

4. Conclusion

As it was shown, the research analyzes the presence of the unreliable narrators in Sartre’s and Murdoch’s selected novels through Booth’s theory of unreliability by considering the characters’ trauma at the context of World War II. As Bennett and Royle (2004: 117) state, “there is no escape from history even if this history is regarded as multiple and in a process of unceasing transformation.” Therefore, literary works should be considered in their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Robin Silbergleid argues that “this is, undeniably, a post-Holocaust world. If, as Virginia Woolf proclaimed, the world changed on or about December 1910, it changed again in 1945, when the camps were revealed to the public” (qt. in Araujo and Vieira: 2011 89). Here, the characters of *Nausea* and *Under the Net* are so much troubled and traumatized that they are incapable of seeing the true reality outside and, consequently, fail in giving an honest image of things and people around them.

When war happens, it affects everything from the life of human beings and their identities to changing their attitudes and perspectives towards the world. Both Sartre

and Murdoch have personally witnessed and felt the suffering of war victims and have a sort of a veiled political agenda in their writings. Considering such a point, the research has found the invisible wounds of World War II in the unreliability of the narrators. Both the characters and the narrators of the novels are traumatized and are suffering from solitude and lack of proper communication in their lives. This kind of trauma has left its mark on their perspective and narrative of events causing many misunderstandings and even making them liars in their narratives. Jake and Antoine are dealing so much with the trauma of solitude as one aspect of the post-war situation that they, consciously or

unconsciously, give an unreliable account of events and an unrealistic image of their surrounding people and represent themselves as untrustworthy or unreliable narrators in the eyes of the narratee.

Based on the points stated, it can be concluded that there is a relationship between an unreliable narrator and the context in which he is living. In other words, the dark aspect of the war completely becomes vivid at the post-war context and gets all beliefs of humanity away from him making him not only doubt everything around him but also incapable of seeing the outside reality or even misunderstanding it.

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راویان نامعتبر در معرض تروما در رمان‌های تهوع از سارتر و زیر تور از آیریس مرداک

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چکیده: تحقیق پیش‌رو به بررسی تطبیقی رمان‌های تهوع از سارتر و زیر تور از آیریس مرداک می‌پردازد. تمرکز اصلی این مطالعه بر نقش تروما یا آسیب در خلق راوی نامعتبر است. سارتر و مرداک هر دو وحشت جنگ جهانی دوم را از نزدیک لمس کرده‌اند و این طور به نظر می‌رسد که روایت‌هایشان متأثر از این رخداد تلخ است. شخصیت‌ها آسیب دیده‌اند و از سنگینی گذشته‌ای که هیچ‌وقت رهایشان نکرده رنج می‌برند. به بیان دیگر، رخداد‌های گذشته هویت آنان را شکل داده و شخصیتشان را در این شرایط جنگی از نو نوشته است. در اینجا، راویان رمان‌های منتخب به واسطه نظریه‌ی راوی نامعتبر وین بوث در زمینه اجتماعی و سیاسی آنها به‌دقت بررسی می‌شوند. بر این اساس، این مطالعه در تلاش است تا با در نظر گرفتن این موقعیت و آسیب‌های غیرقابل اجتناب آن حضور و کارکرد راویان نامعتبر را در این رمان‌ها آشکار سازد.

واژه‌های کلیدی: روایت، راوی نامعتبر، تروما، وین بوث، ژان پل سارتر، آیریس مرداک.