

A Postmodern Reading of *Stories We Never Tell* by Savi Sharma

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Abstract— This article presents an analysis of the novel *Stories We Never Tell* by Savi Sharma through the critical lens of postmodernism. The major thesis is that the novel, though manifesting itself in the form of a modern romance, explores the major postmodern notions. In the article, it is discussed that the nature of the character of Jhanvi is representative of the concept of hyperreality where the persona she creates on social media online becomes more important to her lived experience. This forms an illusion of an ideal life that conceals a lot of inner conflict. Moreover, the story structure, alternating the point of view of Jhanvi and Ashray, is an expression of postmodern fragmentation. The very characters are broken people struggling to seek individual meaning in the world that does not have big, overall stories. The interpretation also relates to the metafictional aspects in the book especially on the final chapters which are a reflection on the book itself. In conclusion, the article assumes that Savi Sharma employs these postmodern methods to condemn the fears of modern subjectivity, disorientation of technology, and the multifaceted process of healing in a postmodern world of surfaces.

Keywords— Postmodernism, Hyperreality, Fragmentation, Social Media, Identity, Grand Narrative, Metafiction, Simulacra.

1. The Hyperreal World and the Fragmented Self

The novel *Stories We Never Tell* by Savi Sharma has captured the attention of many readers. It has managed to do so because it narrates a story of hope and recovery in the contemporary world. Superficially, the book gives a moving story of two people, Jhanvi and Ashray, who are exploring the torturous journey of heartbreak and bereavement. Nevertheless, as we go deeper into the composition of the story, and the psyche of the characters, we are able to observe a strong rationale to the concepts of the postmodern literary theory. In this article, we are going to examine the novel in terms of the postmodernism. It will demonstrate how the book exploits postmodern ideas to provide an acute critique of the modern life and in particular the one that is led behind a screen of a phone. We will pay attention to such concepts as hyperreality, fragmentation, and dissolution of the grand narratives.

Postmodernism may appear to be a complex theory. Nevertheless, we are able to comprehend it simply. The lingo of postmodern thinkers is highly distrustful of large or blanket truths or grand narratives. These grand narratives might be the concepts of religion, progress, or science purporting to explain everything to everybody. Postmodernism does not propose a single truth but multiplicity of smaller ones, which are personal. It tends to dwell on the instability and construction of reality. Jean Baudrillard is one of the key postmodern theorists. He has coined the theory of hyperreality. Hyperreality occurs when a simulation or an imitation of reality is more real and more significant than the reality that it is simulating. An ideal one is a social media account. The profile represents a simulation of the life of a person. The state of hyperreality may produce such a profile to be more significant to the individual than the joy or reality of his real life. The simulation substitutes the reality. The personality of Jhanvi is a perfect example of such an individual who inhabits this hyperreality. Jhanvi is a social media influencer. She is basing her whole career and self-esteem on the development of a flawless online identity. She does not simply lead her life. She is acting her life out in front of followers. Her cheerful nature on her posts is a well-crafted commodity. It does not represent her real emotional condition. When she parted ways with her boyfriend, Puneet, in a painful break-up with him, her instinctive reaction is not to work out her agony. Her immediate reaction is to cope with the story on the internet. She must uphold the appearance of a good life despite the failing occurrences in her actual life.

Through her actions, it is always clear that the hyperreal world of social media dictates the conditions of her existence. As an illustration, she carefully preplans photos and applies filters to make herself a perfect version. It is this version that her followers consume. And this is the one that brand sponsors pay. It has to be concealed as the real Jhanvi is full of pain, insecurity, and loneliness. Simulation should be secured by any means. This is apparent when she ponders on one of the remarks by a follower.

“A comment caught my eye: ‘You are so beautiful, I wish I had your life,’ it read. I rolled my eyes and thought, ‘If only you knew.’” (Sharma 16) It is at this point that the character of Jhanvi comes together. She knows quite comprehensively the difference between her actual life and the image of the simulation that she introduces to the world. The disciple is not desiring the real life of Jhanvi which is painful. The follower desires the hyperreal life, the life that will exist only in the form of selected images and affirmative captions. The success of her own work traps Jhanvi. She needs to keep feeding the simulation, as her identity and income are based on it. This strain compels her to detach herself with her true emotions. Her suffering turns into a nuisance. It is something that she should not be seen by the camera.

Jhanvi habitually transforms instances of crisis in reality into content production opportunities, which are evident throughout the novel. She does not have time to grieve over the loss of her first boyfriend, Gaurav, after a humiliating event in front of others. Rather, she engulfs herself in her job. She focuses on how the scandal affects her online presence.

“In the aftermath, I filled my time online posting excuses for why my relationship had deteriorated, and building a facade that everything was all right. Behind the scenes, I plunged myself into my work, watching how my followers increased and how the demographics changed from young women trying to emulate me to young men trying to offer me some comfort.” (Sharma 12)

In this case, the hyperreal world entirely takes over. The divorce has ceased being an individual tragedy. It turns out to be a strategic event that she can leverage to reform her brand and gain more of her followers. She is striking her heartbreak in front of the world. She is consuming her suffering as profit. This is an ugly side of the postmodern condition where all spheres of life, including misery, might be sold and packaged.

Moreover, her relationships are also affected by the hyperreality. Her associations with boyfriends such as Gaurav and Puneet are determined using their appearances on the internet. The friendship with Gaurav was a collaboration which was founded on the production of a perfect couple content. The image of the connection was more important than the authenticity of the connection. They were co-conspirators in an act.

“Our days were filled taking couples’ photos under crisp white sheets with ‘good morning!’ captions and other meticulously planned pictures in various locations. We barely communicated otherwise, and that suited me. I was never a great talker anyway.” (Sharma 11)

This text brings out a deep vacuum at the very heart of the life of Jhanvi. The physical movements of sensuality as waking up together, are not actual interpersonal interactions. They are acted out photo happenings. The hyperreal has been so taken over as to having destroyed the need to communicate genuinely. The picture of the relationship suffices. The truth about the relationship is empty.

This motif goes on with her second boyfriend, Puneet. The more he gets into her life, the more he cares about his reputation in society more than what his relationship is with Jhanvi. The relationship becomes a personal relation into a public and shallow one. The hyperreal world stresses the authentic love with poison. Jhanvi has become used to this superficial world that she finds it hard to build relationships without performance. She is a creation of a culture in which appearance is more significant than emotion. The journey of Jhanvi is used to criticize this culture in the novel. It demonstrates how a life which is lived to satisfy an online community ends up being a solitary and disjointed one. The split in the self is caused by the constant performance. We see the idealized smiling Jhanvi on the screen, and the malfunctioning, tormented Jhanvi that is hidden. Another central motif of postmodernism is this fragmentation and this is what we will talk about further in the following section. The hyper real world Jhanvi lives in is not something that brings her real happiness. It is an alienation that is deep-seated. It isolates her not only to herself and her feelings, but also to the people who love her and to any possibility of a real life. Her quest in the novel is an attempt to escape this simulated world and take some means of returning to a messy and imperfect, yet real world.

I. THE FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE AND THE COLLAPSE OF GRAND NARRATIVES

In the initial section of this analysis we looked at the fact that the character of Jhanvi exists in the state of hyperreality. The virtual personality she develops online is more significant than her real one. This leaves a great divide in her identity. The notion of division, or disintegration, is one of the main postmodern themes. The characters do not only have a psychological condition. It is also one of the major characteristics of the narrative in itself. Savi Sharma employs a disjointed narrative construction to maximize the postmodern experience of the characters. This part of the article will explore how narrative fragmentation and the collapse of grand narratives shape the world of *Stories We Never Tell*.

The novel lacks one and the same narrator. Rather, the narration is carried out in turn. The perspective of one of the chapters is Jhanvi. The following chapter is the point of view of Ashray. This is not an accidental building. It does not allow the reader to see the whole picture of the events. It is only when we are in her chapter that we know what Jhanvi knows. When we are in his chapter we only know what Ashray knows. This method leads to an effect of incompleteness and subjectivity. We have no all-knowing voice to tell us what to do. The reader has to make the story out of these two different, and in many instances, detached points of view. This psychological fragmentation of the characters is reflected in this narrative fragmentation. The reader has to strive to construct a coherent story just as they are torn apart and find their place in this world.

Whereas Jhanvi is disordered by the need of the hyperreal world, Ashray is disordered by a personal and deep trauma. His narrative starts with a final loss of a great narrative: the narrative of family. He is an orphan. He had been abandoned in the steps of an orphanage during his infancy. This implies that there is a massive blank in the beginning of his life story. He is unaware of his place of origin. He lacks family background to make him feel like a part of something. This primitivism of his is the heart of his disintegration. He is a part of something that has been torn off and thrown away.

It is a search of a new narrative that becomes his whole life. He must have a tale that will fill the vacuum. This is first with his adoptive mother, Maa. She gives him a new story. It is an acceptance and love story. Nevertheless, he never completely gets rid of the fear of being abandoned. It is a wound that is just below the surface of this fear. He tries to create another story when he falls in love with Sakshi. This is the story of romantic love and building a new family. He puts his entire hope in this story. He thinks it will ultimately reunite him.

As Sakshi breaks up with him, this story falls apart entirely. It is so destructive since it reverberates his initial trauma of abandonment. He does not consider it merely a unsuccessful affair. He takes it as an evidence of his worthlessness. In his mind, he feels that he is bound to be thrown away. This sense of being tampered and undeserving is a burden that he bears. His internal being is powerfully explained in the novel following the break up.

“Do you know the feeling? That dull ache that you seem to carry around with you after someone has broken your heart. For weeks, I walked around in a stupor, convincing anybody who would listen that I was fine, that Sakshi’s betrayal had not devastated me. The truth was that, some days, I did not want to get out of bed, not understanding why I was not worthy of love. I would later understand that no matter how much love Maa showered on me, the feelings of betrayal and abandonment from being left on the steps of an orphanage still played heavily on my psyche. I felt neglected, discarded for something or someone better; that no matter what I did to better my life, it wasn’t enough.” (Sharma 94)

This text is a crude statement about the divided personality of Ashray. He is not sure that he is a flawed individual. The Maa love cannot heal the wound initially. He goes around in a circle of being neglected and discarded. It is not only pain that he feels about Sakshi. It is concerning a lifetime of believing that he is not good enough. The physical expression of his intense psychological fragmentation is his panic attacks. They occur when the story that he has created about himself comes to pieces. They are the ones when he is faced with the dreadful emptiness that he has attempted to avoid so much.

This leads to another important postmodern concept the breakdown of grand narratives. Jean-Francois Lyotard is a postmodern theorist who popularly referred to the postmodern condition as an incredulity towards metanarratives. This merely implies that individuals no longer have faith in the big stories that once brought life a purpose. In *Stories We Never Tell*, we see the collapse of several of these grand narratives. The romantic story of how true love will overcome all is unsuccessful with Ashray. Sakshi is not in love with him to withstand her family pressure. The idealistic family story of the ideal family has not worked with Jhanvi. The emotional closeness of Jhanvi to her parents is absent. They care about her, but they do not know how to express it in a manner which she can experience. This isolates and alienates her, although she has a family.

The reality of the world in the novel is the world which has no simple solutions or truth. The old tales are not something that the characters can trust to lead them. Jhanvi does not find a happy life being able to reach the ideal life that the social media advertises. It is not enough to fall in love and be whole as Ashray cannot. Both characters will have to grapple with the reality that the stories that they clung to have failed them. They are put into confusion and hopelessness. They have been lost in a world without clear pointers.

It is this that this novel is able to capture in its postmodern experience. It is a state of being lost. It is a world of being forced to construct your own accounts at a time when the old accounts have been rendered obsolete. The characters do not go to discover some sort of pre-existing truth that will rescue them. It is concerning the challenging and painful experience of building a new, individual truth. In the case of Jhanvi and Ashray, it is a process of construction that starts when they meet. They are two shattered people who are united by the fact that they are busted. They fail to provide one another with a big story that will solve all. Rather, they give one another something lesser, yet more actual. They offer understanding. They offer acceptance. They start to develop a new common story. This story is not constructed on virtue or on something great. It is grounded on the silent toleration of their flaws. Their salvation is not provided by an outside agent. It is the result of the relationship that they establish with one another, the relationship that is formed on the rubble of their broken worlds.

II. PASTICHE, PETITS RÉCITS, AND THE POWER OF TELLING

In the preceding parts, we established how Savi Sharma's *Stories We Never Tell* portrays a world defined by postmodern conditions. We have witnessed how Jhanvi fights in the hyperreal, the identity disintegration of both main characters, and the failure of the large stories of family and romantic love which used to give meaning. The novel creates a bleak image of contemporary alienation and anxiety. Nevertheless, it does not place its characters, or the reader, in a state of nihilistic despair. The concluding section of this discussion will discuss the optimistic ending of the novel and how it manages to have a path through the postmodern condition not by refusing it but by responding to it through construction of miniature or storytelling (petits recits) and the therapeutic effect of collective helplessness.

The title of the novel itself, *Stories We Never Tell*, points directly to its central solution. Both Jhanvi and Ashray are captives of their untold tales. Jhanvi does not confess to anybody of the crushing loneliness she experiences under her flawless social media veil. Ashray never reveals the extent of his trauma with abandonment and his paralysing panic attacks. These secrets are what have fragmented them; they are those aspects of themselves that they feel are unloving and should be concealed. When they start sharing these stories with one another this marks the turning point in the novel. Their relation is not founded on the similarities of their strengths or mutual interests but a bold move of displaying the most vulnerable aspects of themselves.

This exchange forms what Jean-Francois Lyotard, the postmodern theorist, referred to as a petit recit or a small narrative. Following the demise of the grand narratives (the metanarratives of universal truth or religion or historical progress), Lyotard held that meaning might still be discovered in these little local and individual tales. The love affair between Jhanvi and Ashray is a perfect usage of such a petit recit. It is not a fairy-tale romance that is bound to overcome all the problems. It is a silent, hesitant and very intimate story that is created between two individuals who acknowledge the other person as being broken. As Ashray eventually reveals to Jhanvi about his panic attacks, he is not merely telling her something, but he is drawing her into the most disjointed aspect of his identity. The hyperreal character that Jhanvi has been working so hard to build is broken when she confesses that she feels empty and fraudulent herself. Their story is not about a perfect one, but about an imperfect one that accepts imperfections.

The postmodern concept of pastiche can also be brought to comprehend this process. Pastiche is a visual art technique of reorganizing, replicating and pasting together material of several sources and styles. Although frequently applied to art or literature, this may also be applied to explain how Jhanvi and Ashray are redefining their identities. They are unable to revert to what they were meant to be as the whole people as the old narratives portray them to be. Ashray has no power to forget the trauma of being abandoned; Jhanvi has no power to forget the emptiness of the hyperreal. Rather, they have to create a new self out of the pieces of their past.

The pastiche is their new emerging identity. It is a mixture of the background of Ashray as an orphan, his passion about writing, Jhanvi as being a digital native, her desire to experience reality, and, above all, the new component of their mutual understanding. They are not attempting to discover a unique, uncontaminated identity, but are learning to co-exist with a hybrid self. They are rebuilding a life with the rubble of the previous one. They are not healed by removing their scars, but by incorporating them in a new story-by adding their stories to a collective narrative. This narration is a puzzle of their pain in the past and their relationship today.

III. CONCLUSION

Stories We Never Tell is a thoroughly contemporary novel that uses the very structure of its narrative to explore the anxieties of a postmodern world. By means of the switching point of view between Jhanvi and Ashray, Savi Sharma manages to establish a fractured reading experience that reflects the inner life of the characters. The novel successfully identifies the ill of the present-day life: the disorientation of hyperreality, the psychological harm of the fractured self, and hopelessness that comes after the breakdown of the grand narratives of life.

But the message that is finally drawn in the novel is one of deep hope. It implies that the poison of an alienating world in a post modern world is remedied not by going back to the certainty of old times, but by going back to real human relationship. It glorifies the force of the *petit recit*, the small, intimate narrative exchanged between people. When Jhanvi and Ashray finally narrate the stories that they never tell, they start healing up and one another. They show that meaning is not what can be discovered in a large, common truth, but that it needs to be created, experience by experience, by acts of empathy, vulnerability, and acceptance of each other.

The argument in the novel, in a world that can seem disjointed and shallow, is that the most genuine and strong sides of us lie in the relationships we establish with others. It is in the silent process of narrating our story, and in hearing the story of another that we are able to reassemble the fragments of our lives and form a new narrative that in its own small measure is complete.

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