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Research Article



Beyond the Page: Exploring Hypertextual Elements in Milorad Pavic's *The Landscape Painted with Sea*

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Abstract

Hypertext literature is a form of interactive and nonlinear narration that utilizes the digital format to create dynamic and interconnected narrative structures. Postmodernist writers like Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar, Milorad Pavic, etc. incorporated nonlinear

interactive elements within traditional printed books to create a new reading experience. They introduce branching paths, allowing the readers to navigate through the text in a non-sequential manner. Instead of following electronic hyperlinks, readers encounter printed hypertext through footnotes, endnotes, literary games and other techniques. Hypertexts are usually reader-oriented and they usually remove the author from the text. But the works of Milorad Pavic, a Serbo-Croatian writer, follow the hypertext technique in an innovative manner. He experiments with the textual structure in such a way that it ensures both reader interaction and author presence in the hypertextual format. This paper tries to analyse how Pavic's novel *The Landscape Painted with Tea* explores the experimental narrative structure to guarantee reader and author participation the text.

Keyword: Milorad Pavic, *The Landscape Painted with Tea*, Hypertext, Nonlinearity, Interactive text conjectures, Reader participation, Author figure, Postmodernism

Hypertext literature is a form of interactive and nonlinear narration that utilizes the novel formats of digital technology to create a dynamic narrative structure. It differs from the traditional narratives in many different ways. Traditional narratives follow a predetermined path with definite trajectories whereas hypertext literature anticipates multiple pathways and ensures reader participation in the reading process. Instead of the fixed sequencing of pages, hypertexts provide nodes, links, footnotes or textual cues that allow the reader to traverse through different sections to create a varied reading experience. Before the advent of computers and hypertexts many postmodernist writers tried to experiment new ways in their text. Such texts, which are often designated as protohypertexts or hypertexts in print, are considered as the precursors of hypertext reading. Like digital hypertexts, print hypertexts challenge the conventional structure of books by incorporating multiple pathways and dynamic reading cues. This paper tries to analyse the hypertextual elements in Milorad Pavic's *The Landscape Painted with Sea* and how it creates a niche of its own in the postmodern literary scenario.

Several postmodernist writers experimented with hypertext elements by introducing nonlinear narrative and interactive features within the confines of literary text. Italo Calvino integrates multiple narratives and invites readers to engage in the text; Jorge Luis Borges, uses interactive features in his short stories that allow the readers to choose the paths; Julio Cortazer presents fragmented narrative structures and reading orders that encourage the readers to have a non-linear engagement with the text. Milorad Pavic, the Serbo- Croatian writer, also follows the same technique and creates textual conjectures in the text to ensure reader participation. He was a professor of Comparative Literature at the universities of Novi Sad and Belgrade and could deal with varied subjects and streams of knowledge with ease and authenticity. With unconventional literary techniques, he tried to introduce nonlinearity in his works:

There are some arts which enable the recipient to approach the work from various sides, or even to go around it and have a good look at it changing the spot, the perspective and the direction of his looking at it according to his own preference, as is the case with architecture, sculpture or painting, that are reversible. Other non-reversible arts, such as music and literature look like one-way roads on which everything moves from beginning to the end, from birth to death. I have always wished to make literature, which is non

reversible art, a reversible one. Therefore, my novels have no beginning and no end in the classical meaning of the text. ("The Beginning and the End of the Reading" 142)

Pavic's second novel, *The Landscape Painted with Tea*, is also an epitome of his own efforts to transform the irreversible art into the reversible. His goal as a writer is to destroy the conventional reading and interpreting methods. He accomplishes this by designing texts that challenge conventional reading and by forcing the reader into making a series of self-conscious choices to navigate in it. In an interview with Thanassis Lallas, Pavic observes: "in my opinion, the book is going through a period of decadence and crisis, but the novel is not. If there is something in crisis it is the way of reading. That is why I try to push the reader to be more active" (129). *Landscape* follows an intriguing narrative blending elements of mystery and fantasy with the backdrop of a vivid landscape. This novel consists of two books: *A Little Night Novel* and *A Novel for Crossword Fans*. *The Little Night Novel* was written and published earlier but, later it was used as a preamble in *The Landscape*.

The novel opens with the description of the Christian monks who dispersed and created new orders because of persecution. They eventually get divided into two groups: the solidarities or cenobites and the solitaries or idiorhythmic. Both these orders differ from each other in their perceptions, in their way of life, and in the crafts they pursue. The solidarities preferred a communal life and the solitaries favoured solitude. The first part also narrates historical events like how the Serbs founded monasteries in Sinai and Chilandar. The monastery of Chilandar or Hilander is a meeting point of Byzantine-Slavic culture. After the persecution, the Christians dispersed through Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, hiding in cellars, pyramids, and blocks. They spoke different languages and, as Pavic suggests, at times, even silence became their powerful language. Once they reached Sinai, they understood the secret behind their journey, and they started two sects: the cenobites and idiorhythmic, corresponding to the two different ways of life. The idiorhythmic or solitaries chose the sign of fish as their emblem and the cenobites chose the sign of the lamb. Later on, these monasteries in Sinai were attached to the famous Chilandar monastery on Mount Athos. Chilandar monastery was founded in 1198 by the first Serbian archbishop Saint Sava and his father. Byzantium emperor Aleksei III gave out the vast land around the monastery to be an "eternal present to the Serbs." Many Serbian kings contributed generously to the extension of the monastery. During the 14th and the 15th centuries, the monastery reached its heyday and hoarded wealth and artefacts donated by the emperors and individuals. Even now, it is regarded as the centre of Serbian religious and secular culture, and is often hailed as the first Serbian university. The monastery has many extraordinary frescoes, and it is one of the biggest libraries of the Slavic and the Greek manuscripts.

After stating the historical facts, story moves on to the fictional character Atanas Svilar, a Serbian architect, who decides to find out his father who disappeared in Greece during World War II. In between the escapades of this search, Pavic intertwines the story of how the monks moved from Mount Sinai to Mount Athos. He juxtaposes the two events and creates a narrative with two complementary parts. In this allegorical story about the two kinds of monks, Pavic transforms his historical material by combining it with legendary and mythological sources. This collage effect, composed of documents and traditional oral narratives, is further expanded with an imaginary story of Atanas Svilar. Eventually, Atanas gets a clue about his father that

three soldiers who tried to escape from the Nazis were taken to Mount Athos, and Atanas sets to that place. When he reaches there, the monks are waiting for him, and they confirm that Atanas' father was there, along with two other fugitives. One of the monks tried to help them to flee away, but after that, they did not hear anything from him. Atanas realises that his history and his fate are entwined in the secrets of Mount Athos. The novel oscillates between the past and the present, sometimes making huge leaps from the early ages to the Middle Ages and then to the modern periods.

Pavic uses the two sects of monks to discern the duality of human nature and gives it a universal dimension. The history of the monks is used to analyse the theme of dichotomy which is applicable to all humanity. Jelena Milojkovic observed that Pavic defined *The Little Night Novel* as his interpretation of generational conflict between fathers and sons, and his comprehension of human nature in general. Later on, when it was used as the first part of *Landscape*, Pavic wanted to describe the fate of his own generation (117). On reaching Mount Athos, Atanas recognises the reason for his failure in life. He identifies himself as a cenobite and hence cannot be a successful artist.

Pavic then changes the whole pattern of the novel when he moves on to the second part. He converts the text into a complex non-linear dynamic system, and the text becomes unpredictable and indeterminate to a great extent. This part traces the development of Atanas into a millionaire and a recluse. At Mount Athos, he realizes that he belongs to the order of solitaries and then decides to change his whole identity. Having learned that his father was not Kosta, but a Russian mathematician named Alexei Razin, Atanas immigrates to the United States, and starts working as a nuclear waste dealer and becomes extremely rich. He is not able to be successful in his vocation as an architect, but he attains the position of a man who owns two percent of the world's income from the sale of nuclear equipment for peacetime purposes. Atanas has become a millionaire and is seen living with his second wife, Vitachia Milut, in Chicago. Vitachia married a Major and had two daughters, but she left them to elope with Atanas. Atanas and Vitachia's family history is traced in the crossword conjecture of the novel. At times, the narrative is interrupted by another narrator, who claims to be Atanas' school friend and he justifies the use of crossword in narrating Atanas' story. In the meantime, Atanas grows old and meets a child, Azerado, who predicts that Vitachia will leave him for someone very young. Vitachia leaves for Italy and becomes a Pop singer there. Atanas learns from her diary that the lover who snatched Vitachia away from him was none other than the reader of Pavic's novel! Vitachia fell in love with the reader of the book about her and Atanas decides to take revenge on the reader. Atanas sends a killer to Italy with instruction to kill his wife if only the reflection in the water shows a male face. Thus, the fate of Vitachia is sealed by the gender of the reader; if the reader is female, she will be spared. Pavic provides an anagram at the end of the novel for the reader to decipher the fate of Vitachia. By solving the anagram, the reader identifies the reflection in Vitachia's room. If the reader is female, the killer will spare Vitachia, but if the reader is a man, the killer will kill Vitachia. Pavic opens up new modes of reader participation in the novel by introducing the reader as a character in the novel.

This is not a comprehensive summary as the text has many twists and turns and the comprehension of the novel is affected by the way we read the novel: across or down. The downward reading follows the fate of characters, while the crossword reading traces the plot of

the story without denouement. The reader can read the novel in several ways and can follow Atanas' fate from several perspectives. Mihajlovic identifies the absence of causal logic in the story as one of the characteristic features of postmodernism. This is achieved through the destruction of the chronological linearity and cause/effect relations of the story. By using the crossword puzzle, Pavic destroys the realistic manner of writing and conveys a more coherent story.

The rejection of the linear narrative has far-reaching consequences rather than being mere experimentation. Pavic encloses a trap for the readers in the pages of *Landscape*. He offers ultimate freedom to the readers to proceed through the complexities of the novel, but in the end, regardless of the freedom or choice they make, they end up being misled by the author. As promised, the readers can reach the climax of the novel by choosing either the horizontal or the vertical path; but the ending of the novel depends on the gender of the readers, not on the choice of the path they make. Unlike other hypertext novels in print, here the reader has entered the text and played a considerable role in determining the fate of the character. But such a responsibility has nothing to do with the readers' individual choices and the readers realise that they are being led by none other than the author through the predetermined paths.

Pavic claims that he assembles a riddle in the narrative strata of the text. He gives the clue that the answer to the riddle is embedded in the index pages of the novel. The original author steps out and gives enough space for the reader-author to come out with the literary denouement. An alphabetically ordered list of words needed to reconstruct the solution of the novel is presented in the index with the page numbers on which they appear in the text. By arranging the words in the index according to the order in which the reader encounters them in the text, the reader will obtain the solution. Thus, the solution depends on the order we choose to read the novel, and it varies from the horizontal to the vertical reader. Pavic also presents a sample conclusion in the final part which roughly corresponds to the solution given by the horizontal reader. Whatever the solution is, it does not make any difference in the comprehension of the novel. By the end of the novel, the readers make some realisations, such as Pavic was only playing a trick with them and the solution of the riddle does not have any link with the crosswords. The most shocking among them is the realisation that the crossword embedded in the text is not meant to be solved, but that is only an instruction for the readers to navigate through the text. When the reader reaches the final part of the novel, he/she is all the more confused and is not inclined to find the solution to the novel. *Landscape* thus resembles the hypertext web format in many ways. It tests the patience of the readers and plays with their intentions to become a co-author of the text. Though, in the printed form, it offers numerous ways for the readers and also generates a sense of incompleteness in the minds of the readers. Likewise, reading the web-based hypertext, the readers get exhausted, and they turn the pages of the book again and again to find an apt conclusion.

In *Landscape* the readers are asked to follow the vertical or the horizontal path with clear instruction that those who choose the vertical path will be rewarded. But, at the end, the reader realizes that the path they choose does not make any difference in the outcome. Usually in stories clues, hidden meanings, and signs lead to the solution of the dilemma, whereas in *Landscape* none of these images, which are closely followed by the readers, have any relevance. All these elements are part of the trap set by the author, and the reader leaves the text with the

satisfaction that he/she took up the challenge. In fact, both the vertical and the horizontal readers fall in the trap set by the author—the vertical is not properly rewarded and the horizontal is labelled as passive.

The narratorial voice of Pavic is not at all reliable as he manages to deceive the readers till the end of the novel. The novel shows strong authorial presence, but he never bothers to present a clear closure. His sole aim is to create a new way of writing, and a way of reading in which the author, the reader, and the text share equal responsibilities. Pavic qualifies his work as a prototype of an open work both in terms of the structure and the manner of reading. Umberto Eco used the term open work to describe a book which can be interpreted in many ways. But, for Pavic, the openness is visible in its reading stage and not at the semantic level. He limits his experimentation to navigating through the text from left to right, right to left, and vertically or diagonally. By navigating through the text in these innumerable ways, the reader can ascribe many meanings or as many meanings as possible. The author does not designate any specific meaning to the text and he asks the readers to connect the entries to make different meanings.

In *Landscape*, each thread of the crossword becomes a path and the reader becomes a traveller who treads the unknown terrains of the textual landscape. The clues of the crossword act as signposts that invite the reader to unearth the hidden treasure of reading experience. Unlike traditional texts, the readers are equipped with the freedom to traverse to and fro at their own will and hence, they are able to unearth the meanings that lie between the lines. Pavic's landscape provides a blank canvas for the reader and each reader can paint the picture in his imagination. These hypertextual nodes provide the reader with an agency that offers him choices to delve deep into the subplots and subthemes of the novel. At the same time, through certain tricks Pavic ensures that the reins of the story are safe in his hands. Thus, as Pavic imagined, the reader becomes an active participant, and the novel itself turns into a “reversible” form of art.

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