Chaucer's Metanarrative: *The Canterbury Tales*

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For fourteenth century audience, story collection was a familiar literary genre. In fact, story-telling forms a part of our oral heritage so much so that its origin can be traced back to the very birth of culture and mythology. The two Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata form not only the backbone of our mythology and religion but are also commonly considered as the oldest available prototypes of 'metanarratives'. The term 'metanarrative' can simply be explained as 'a big story'. Technically, it has a major story at its core, which is called the 'framed narrative' or the 'linked narrative', which in turn, gives birth to a number of other tales and sub-tales. Owing to the story-within-a-story constitution of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, there are multiple narrators of these texts who, conversely, serve as the subjects too. These two canons of Indian narrative tradition inspired other metanarratives of the world including *Kathasaritasagar*, *Shah-e-nama*, *Panchtantra*, *Odyssey*, *Arabian Nights*, *Aesop's Fables* and *Decameron*. These texts are consummate illustrations of metanarratology in having a central story which encourages further web-weaving of tales derived from oral tradition, folk-lore, myths and legends.

The Canterbury Tales is a similar collection of stories told by a motley group of story-tellers. In this case, the frame story deals with a group of pilgrims heading towards Canterbury to offer prayers at the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. On the way, they have a stopover at Tabard's Inn in Southwark where they spend a night. In order to make the journey more exciting and less tedious, their host at the inn, who is addressed as Harry Bailly, suggests a story-telling competition. He recommends that one person should narrate two stories on their journey towards Canterbury and the same number of tales on their return journey:

> That ech of yow, to shorte with oure weye,
>   In this viage shal telle tales tweye
>   To Caunterbury-ward, I mene it so,
>   And homeward he shal tellen othere two, . . . (The Prologue 147)

There is an additional condition that the tales must either be instructive or entertaining in nature. He further adds that the stories narrated would be subject to judgement and the winner of the best story would be given a treat by the rest of the party: "Shal have a soper at oure cost / Heere in this place, sittynge by this post, / Whan that we come again fro Caunterbury." Lo and behold a massive assortment of stories!

The simple definition of a 'narrative' is "telling of a story" or "providing an account or describing an event". To make narration more comprehensible, one can roughly divide it in two categories: poetic or fictitious and non-poetic or practical. Poetic narration is an umbrella term which covers a wide range of literary narratives under its awning – fable, fantasy, myth, epic poem and even plays. On the other hand, non-poetic field of narration may refer to confessions (in the Church) and psychoanalysis (under clinical conditions), both of which aim at reconstruction of the past. Such a narration is not only based on real incidents but also plays a function other than that of providing pleasure. It is a painful mode of narration for the sinner or the patient, whichever the case may be, and has the sole purpose of creating a better and more acceptable future for the narrator. According to Fridrun Rinner, "Through understanding, regret and penitence or through understanding, explanation and self-confidence, the narrator is meant to be strengthened in order to accept his/her own self in the future . . . and the result should be an elevation of the suffering person . . ." (181). It can safely be concluded that non-poetic areas

of narration have a compulsive retelling of the events as its basis and this compulsion is initiated by the will of the narrator or prompted by his/her circumstances.

By virtue of being a literary product, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* belongs to the former category of poetic narration. Poetic narration can be further classified into two – 'Instrumental' and 'Cyclic'. The difference between the two is more apparent than real. The two terms generally overlap and are combined except for the fact that in instrumental narration, the narrators are constituted together in a special, difficult and embarrassing situation. The stories are told with the intention of solving a special and overtly pronounced problem. *The Arabian Nights* is a classic case of instrumental narration where Sheherezade tells the Sultan a story every night with the intention of not being killed like all his previous wives. Her narration has a short-term purpose, namely, to survive until next night. In order to achieve her goal, Sheherezade devices a plan according to which she leaves a story unfinished to be continued the next night. In this manner, she gains life night-after-night by sheer appliance of her wit.

On the other hand, the narrators are incidentally brought together in the cyclic narration and, as a result, a number of independent stories emerge in a wider relation. In *Decamaron*, Boccaccio hurls together a group of ten men and women who, in order to avoid the physical, moral and social anarchy of a plague-infected city, meet in the countryside and start narrating stories to one another. Such narrative forms are often closed in nature. Apart from forming a cycle of stories, adequate information is also provided regarding the occasion, the narrator and his/her listeners before, after and in-between every single story.

Such a structure is observed in *The Canterbury Tales*. *The Prologue* sets the atmosphere and provides an adequate background of the work – situation, characters and their purpose. In order to people the world of *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer "found his diversity of creatures in the circumstantial world about him, God's world, his own world, the world of the port of London, the world of England itself." (Coghill 86). Chaucer gave us men of flesh and blood but he wrought them with wide sympathy and unmatched humour. However, the reader is introduced to this plethora of characters by the poet himself. Here, Chaucer adopts a persona and hides his real self. Chaucer becomes one of the pilgrims, thus giving us the voice of experience and; in his second role, he becomes the omniscient observer, thereby, giving us the voice of authority. These two voices are fused together metamorphosing the poet himself into a narrator. Nevertheless, because he is also one of the pilgrims, Chaucer becomes the subject too. By the end of *The Prologue*, the reader is informed that he/she will encounter new and multiple narrators in the garb of each and every pilgrim.

In the main text, the characters begin narrating their stories displaying their own idiosyncrasies in the process. Furthermore, each story is artistically narrated giving rise to a sequence of fresh tales; for instance, the Wife of Bath's views about marriage lead to a quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner and a fresh story starts. Thus, Chaucer skillfully provides connecting links between different tales. Another such quarrel between the Miller and the Reeve also lead to a tale in retaliation. The Miller's Tale angers the Reeve because of its unjust portrayal of a carpenter. This leads the Reeve to even the score with a bawdy tale about a Miller. The narrative links impose some kind of sequential order to the tales. The multiple narrators are closely interspersed and are involved in a situational entanglement. These links often transcend their primary function of providing connection between the tales and add to the dramatic quality of the work. Also the characters of the pilgrims develop during these links as they talk, criticize and quarrel amongst themselves. We can deduce that the pilgrims are first introduced as subjects, then they transform into the role of narrators and in between the story-telling they again adopt the role of subjects to be studied for their peculiarities. The outer framework of *The Prologue* thus contains the inner form of the tales.

Another technique used by Chaucer is to provide side commentary in his distinct style. When the Miller has become drunk, he insists on telling his story. Chaucer warns the readers that the tale might be bawdy and apologizes to the reader while reminding the reader that it is his duty to record everything. He also innocently advises the reader that he/she may skip the tale altogether and go ahead to the moralistic stories. The essential source of drama and action thus comes from the inter-linking and inter-play of stories and from the interaction between characters. Nonetheless, the stories comprising are diverse, independent and exceedingly humorous. On one side, the Knight's tale is romantic in nature centering upon the conflict between two suitors and on the other we are presented with the bawdy tales of the roguish churls. Some stories have a satirical vein while others are highly moral in nature.

In the fourteenth century, Chaucer successfully blurred the boundaries between the teller and the listener, the observer and its object of consideration for the English reader. The structure and the narrative style which Chaucer selected for his magnum opus draw attention to the idea of global literature which is inspired by forms, motifs and symbols present in the archetypes. They, in turn, become a part of our global heritage and are perpetually re-visited by the posterity.

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