



The Time of the Hero : A Magnum Opus in Technique by M.V. Llosa

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Abstract

Various narrative techniques have been evolved during the last fifty years and the centre thereof has been chiefly France. Mario Vargas Llosa travelled to France, Germany, Spain and England and stayed over there for studying the popular trends. He was much influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre. His predecessors were a great source of inspiration to him as they not only represented their soil but also experimented enormously. The first novel by Mario Vargas Llosa created a cataclysm in the Latin American literary firmament and proved to be a harsh blow on the Leoncio Prado Military Academy of Lima where the novel was set. The most significant aspect of the novel as a piece of literature is the technical side that baffled the readers. Gradually it allowed people to understand as to what actually the novel focused to present. Depicting the life of the adolescent cadets in the Academy the novel allegorically presents the reality of Perú. The reader encounters the narrative techniques that stun him and take a lot of time to find meaning. The author is outstanding in employing in his fiction amazing narrative techniques mingled with his equally refined style to describe the incredible incidents.

Keywords: jigsaw puzzle, Rubik's magic cube, flashback, cinematographic, register, Chinese Boxes, cliff-hanger, Dadaism, magical realism.

The Latin American Nobel Laureate (2010), Jorge Mario Pedro Vargas Llosa was born on March 28th 1936 in Perú. He is a renowned novelist and an essayist and many of his interviews available online are a great source of information about his life and writings. His experiments and innovations in the narrative techniques have revolutionized the writing style. The reader finds oneself in the labyrinth of Llosa's fictional world once he begins to read any of his novels. The initial part of the novels make the reader a rolling stone that gathers no idea about where he will be led through the novel. These pieces of fiction depict both the reality of the Latin American world wherein the author finds the political system and the society full of corruption and madly running after power.

The first novel by Llosa *The Time of the Hero* appearing in 1963, wavered the officers of the Leoncio Prado Military Academy of Lima in which the author studied for two years in his early years. The officers of the Academy took it as a conspiracy against the Academy and they retaliated by burning over a thousand copies publically which paid Llosa with greater popularity giving a hike in the sale of its copies. While writing his experiences in the Academy Llosa dips his pen in gall. The author has absolutely denied



the linear development of the plot of the novel and has adopted a completely chaotic narrative technique in the novel. The action and its narration are contradictory to each other, although the action runs in its normal motion, but the author introduces so many other things like nostalgic pondering of the characters; scenes that are alien to the main action; and places and incidences far away from the action. It is the technique of the author that deliberately digresses the concentration of the reader and this way the author withholds so many facts to be disclosed in the end of the action and not in the end of the novel.

The hostel of the Leoncio Prado Military Academy is presented as a quite old and dirty building wherein the cadets used to sleep in the bunks. The disgruntled and curious adolescent cadets (students) found the world to be a novel phenomenon to them and they are presented as experimenting with everything as if there will be no time in future to act. Thematically the novel presents various aspects of life that include family disjointedness, wrath, love, possessiveness, vengeance, friendship, prostitution, humanity, courage, drinking, smoking, black marketing, theft, prostitution, unnatural sex, bestiality, ragging, brutality, rivalry, crime etc.

The technical aspect of the novel is so sound that one finds oneself with no clue and still walking on a dark path reading repeatedly to connect the diversely scattered strands of incidents. The novel has two parts with their own subsections and it ends with an epilogue. There is an omnipresent narrator who not only tells the reader as what is going on but is also aware of as to what will follow. The first part begins after the real action has already begun and through the flashbacks it gradually takes us back to the beginning of the real action. The characters have their original names with some other names too without using the term alias and this peculiarity of the novel most of the time confuses the reader and one has either to rack one's brain or to turn the pages back to find the real character. Thus the linear motion of progress in the story is deliberately discarded by the author and similar thing happens with the action.

The central incident in *The Time of the Hero* is the death of a cadet Ricardo Arana, also known as the Slave, during a military parade and this death, although caused by the gunshot of Jaguar, was not well investigated into as the officials of the Academy attempted to save the reputation of the Academy. But the conscience of an honest and upright officer Lieutenant Gamboa did not allow to ignore the fact. The chief (main)



reason behind this murder was the exposure of the theft committed by the Circle, which consisted of four cadets, namely, Jaguar, Boa, Alberto Fernandez also known as the Poet and Porfirio Cava, alias the Peasant. In fact the Circle assigned the task of stealing the examination paper of chemistry to Porfirio Cava who accidentally breaks a window pane in the darkness of night. All the cadets were punished with the cancellation of their weekly pass until the real culprit of theft confesses the guilt. As Ricardo Arana or the Slave was in love with Teresa, he does not tolerate remaining confined in the barracks for a long time. He approaches a senior officer and tells the name of Cava as the stealer of the paper of chemistry and gets a pass. This resulted in the rustication of Cava and the Jaguar takes it very seriously. He also he assumes Ricardo to be the swindler for he got a pass. Prompted by the desire to teach him a lesson and take revenge, the Jaguar shoots him as he finds an opportunity.

The novel employs many modern techniques which were prevalent in painting and other forms of art. The Dadaism of 1950s, of which one of the exponents was Tristan Tzara, has its glimpses in the novel that represents disjointedness and chaos after the World War I in the world. The patches of paragraphs in the novel are so scattered that the reader has to establish link among them with great labour and patience. The paragraphs are like the multi-coloured facets of the Rubik's magic cube that demand readers to participate actively while reading. Sometimes the management of the connectivity of the meaning is found like a jigsaw puzzle and one is able to complete a picture only when the right blocks or paragraphs are put together. By employing such techniques the author successfully draws the real picture of Perú and its corrupted society. In fact the Academy is a microcosm of Perú. It is through the recollections of the characters that the reader fluctuates both forward and backwards in time, place and action while physically remaining at one place. Further, the reminiscences of the cadets are a great tool in peering deep into the psyche of the characters. The author often withholds some facts or information for the assumption of the reader and includes narrative within narrative like a telescope. Luis Harss, in the *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin-American writers*, clearly criticizes as: "Vargas Llosa has the bad habit of withholding vital information" (355). This is also known as the Chinese Boxes technique. About this technique in the *Letters to a Young Novelist*, the author explains as: "The story is constructed like those traditional puzzles with successively smaller and



smaller identical parts nestled inside each other, sometimes dwindling to the infinitesimal” (Llosa 101). It is employing the cliff-hanger to the story.

The author takes the reader from the hostel of the Academy to the ground and to the examination hall, then to the parade ground for the rustication of Cava, and then to the hide-out of Paulino, the Chinese, then to the chicken-coop, then to the prostitute Golden Toe and all this movement is known as the cinematographic technique. Llosa uses the technique of changing the chronology and presents events haphazardly. The stream of consciousness technique is evident when the cadets are found waking in their bunks. Similarly the magical realism technique is represented by the characters in their day dreaming.

The triumph of Vargas Llosa over making bold and impressive phrases are clearly evident in *The Time of the Hero*. His military register is quite sound and the expressions are crystal clear. In the Leoncio Prado Military Academy, when Alberto encounters Lt. Remigio Huarina, he begins to ask some personal problems to him. “Huarina . said, ‘I’m not a priest, goddamn it! Go take your personal problems to your father or mother!’”(12-13). Stopping a brief conversation with Alberto, the lieutenant shouts: “You should never leave your post except when you’re dead” (15). Another picture of Lima represented in the novel with the technique of Gustave Flaubert has two aspects: the extremity of brutality by the cadets of the Academy on a chicken, and the voices within the voices, creating a confused state of conversation. Personification occurs when the members of the circle talk to a chicken while penetrating it: “Shut your beak, you dirty bitch! Lieutenant Gamboa, here’s somebody screwing a chicken” (29). The picturesque description of the ragging of the newcomers by the senior cadets appears in the novel as: “They stripped him and the voice ordered him to lie down and ‘swim’ on his back around the soccer field . . . he made up a lot of bunks, sang and danced on a locker, imitated movie stars, polished many pairs of boots, cleaned a floor tile with his tongue, screwed a pillow, drank piss” (46).

The genius of the author is at its full bloom when we come across his similes and metaphors. The atrocities of the father of Ricardo Arana at his mother is described as, “he dragged her away as if she were a rag doll” (75). Further, the girl “glanced around her with the quick bright eyes of a squirrel” (87). When Teresa goes to the movie he finds, “there was a hungry stare in her eyes” (93). Vallanois found thinking about the



prostitute Golden Toes, “His eyes rolled in their sockets like two magnetized steel balls,” and her name “began to ring in Alberto’s ears like a popular song” (97). There is a continuous struggle and tension between the binary ends in the novel. In his “Analysis of Mario Vargas Llosa’s Novels.” *Literary Theory and Criticism*, Nasrullah Mambrol, very aptly opines, as: “The tension created by the opposition between the two realities is felt both by the characters within the novels and by the reader, and it is the prime factor in the dramatic nature of Vargas Llosa’s style” (1). Finding Alberto inactive, the Golden Toes “looked at him with the hardest eyes Alberto had ever seen” (101). When the cadets were punished, they “stared with vacant eyes”(107). At the exhortation of the mother to keep his father Ricardo Arana feels “his heart throbbing heavily, like one of those toads that infested the orchard at the house in Chiclayo and that looked like a gland with eyes, like a bellows filling and emptying” (108). Similarly “the “swollen eyes” of Huarina “looked like two enormous wounds in his round face” (124).

The employment of extraordinary and stunning narrative techniques in *The Time of the Hero*, Mario Vargas Llosa certainly makes his fictional world not only interesting but he also puts the reader to work and move to and fro in the novel.

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