

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Reflections on the Writing Process: Perspectives from Recent Hindi Novels

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Abstract

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as ‘fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’¹. Metafictional works, she suggests, are those which ‘explore a theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction’. They are characterised by a tendency to self-reflexivity or, in other words, by a tendency to call attention to the writing process itself. However, even in dedicated critical works, it is not easy to find a clear and all-encompassing definition of metafiction. Generally, various types of texts are mentioned under this term: texts recounting their origin and birth, dealing with the history of narrative, recounting stories of writers.

Metafiction is generally considered an important feature of postmodern literature. In the postmodern era pure realist writing is perceived as a limitation and an unsuitable device to render the complexity of the contemporary world. As Baudrillard says, we no longer live in a world made of unequivocal meanings, we live in a world of signs. In this context authors, by reflecting on the writing process, foreground the fictional nature of their narratives. Because of this, the role of metafiction (which obviously cannot be considered as an innovation introduced by postmodernism) has become predominant in the postmodern era. Metafiction can follow different paths to reach its aims: its experimental component can be evident and radical or can be limited to a few pages or lines, without unduly affecting the perception of the story. In some cases, the reader will find no reflections on the structure or on the textual functions of the novel, but on its artistic and intellectual meaning.

Within the history of Hindi literature (referring here to Modern Hindi only) probably the most famous example of metafictional novel is *Suraj ka Satvan Ghoda* (*The Sun's Seventh Horse*, 1952) by Dharmavir Bharati. The novel consists of three narratives about three women recounted by Manik Mulla to his friends over seven afternoons, in the style of *Panchatantra*² or *Hitopadesha*³. Later, in the 1970s, Krishna Baldev Vaid published *Bimal Urf Jayen to Jayen Kahan*. From the earliest pages of the novel, the narrator addresses his readers with provocative monologues. According to the materials consulted in my research, there are not many other examples of self-reflexive novels until the 1990s: from this decade onwards, the metafictional component seems to gain new importance. The aim of this paper is to exemplify the new role acquired by metafiction in recent Hindi novels and to understand if it can be considered a possible postmodern trace.

¹ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984) 2.

² The *Panchatantra* (lit. *The Five Texts for Education*) consists of five books of animal fables and magic tales, with an explicit didactic intention. Each book contains a main story (frame story) and several embedded tales narrated by a character to another. The original Sanskrit work, attributed to Vishnu Sharma, was compiled between the 2nd and the 5th century AD.

³ *Hitopadesha* (*The Book of Good Counsels*) is a collection of Sanskrit fables, explicitly inspired by *Panchatantra* and by another not well defined work. Differently from *Panchatantra* it is divided in four sections only. *Hitopadesha* was presumably composed between the 9th and the 14th century.

1. Postmodernism and the Indian context

The first concept to be discussed is necessarily that of postmodernism: is it suitable for the Indian context? Even though this issue cannot be analysed here in detail, I will attempt to suggest its main coordinates. The concept of postmodernism was born in the 'Western world' and has become one of the keywords in debates among intellectuals in Europe and the USA since the 1960s. The prefix *post-* should not be read in a chronological sense, as it refers more to 'logical and historical *consequence* rather than sheer temporal *posteriority*'.⁴ Postmodernism challenges scientific positivism, Enlightenment rationalism and the inevitability of human progress. In Derrida and Lyotard's terminology, postmodernism *deconstructs* the *grands récits*, the totalising ideologies related to Enlightenment and modernity. As the concept appears deeply connected with the historical and socio-cultural background of the Western world, many Indian scholars are quite sceptical about extending this term to their own reality. Postmodernism is often considered merely to be an imported fashion, which is not suitable for a postcolonial reality such as India. There is no modernity in the subcontinent – they argue – so how can we talk about postmodernism? Nevertheless, in an interview I had with Sudhish Pachauri – one of the most important scholars who has written extensively about postmodernism and Hindi literature – he highlighted the importance of looking at India as a complex and multi-faceted reality. Simultaneously, we can find traces of pre-modernity in *adivasi*'s⁵ style of life; traces of modernity in democratic institutions and in the development of an extended middle class; traces of postmodernity in the revolution of telecommunications, in the participation in consumerism and globalisation. S.L. Doshi as well, from a sociological point of view, described India as a 'kaleidoscopic interplay of tradition, modernity and postmodernity'.⁶ The economic reforms of the 1990s played a fundamental role in moving India towards a postmodern condition. During Narasimha Rao's term as Prime Minister (1991-1996) India started its path towards liberalisation, consumerism and globalisation, even though aspects of a late capitalistic nation still coexist with others of extreme backwardness. The reality of the subcontinent – which is by its nature a mosaic of languages, cultures, landscapes – has become even more complex, a sort of hymn to pluralism.

Briefly, according to many critics, if we talk of postmodernism for the Indian context it corresponds to the cultural condition of post-liberalisation (post-1991). In the opinion of Sudhish Pachauri⁷ and Pandey Shashibhushan Shitanshu⁸ postmodernism can hardly be defined, as it is a highly unstable and uncertain condition. On one hand postmodernism refuses all unifying and

⁴ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 5.

⁵ The term *adivasi* carries the specific meaning of being the original, autochthonous inhabitants of a given region. It denotes the tribal groups populating not only India, but also Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

⁶ S. L. Doshi, *Postmodern Perspectives on Indian Society* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2008) 79.

⁷ See Sudhish Pachauri, *Uttar-adhunik Sahityik Vimarsh* (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2010).

⁸ See Pandey Shashibhushan Shitanshu, *Uttar Adhunik Sahitya-srishti aur Samiksha-drishti ke beech "Warren Hastings ka Saand"*, Madhumti, ank 12 (December 2000) 5-20.

centralising theories; it deals with minorities, with subaltern groups and shows their struggle against dominating and oppressive forces. In India this is expressed by feminist and dalit writing, raising their voices against patriarchy and casteism. On the other hand, if we look at the mainstream literature, during the last 25 years, a new and interesting dimension has appeared: it is playfulness. In our consumerist society people do not want to buy sorrow and suffering (which is a fundamental part of the realist tradition), but well-being and happiness. Therefore, we have started to encounter texts whose plots are extremely condensed, with no great ideals or eternal truths and especially no didactic intention. Postmodernism implies a new concept of literature of pleasure, in opposition to the previous realist tradition; playfulness and irony become new tools to express the complexity of the global world. There is no longer a univocal reality to be represented, but a world made of signs and only personal and partial perspectives can be proposed. Moreover, literature becomes a product of the consumeristic society and the distance between high and popular literature is erased.

In the following sections I will provide examples of metafictional writing from three Hindi novels, written after economic liberalisation, *T-ta Professor* (Manohar Shyam Joshi, 1995), *Kathgulab* (Lit. *Wood-rose*, Mridula Garg, 1996) and *Ek Naukrani ki Diary* (*The Diary of a Maidservant*, Krishna Baldev Vaid, 2000). The three authors, with different strategies, explicitly reflect on the meaning of writing, in a personal and intimate dimension. I will endeavour to demonstrate how this self-reflexive dimension can be linked to some typical postmodern issues, as the complexity of the world and of human experience and the impossibility of defining any indisputable truth.

2. *T-ta Professor* by Manohar Shyam Joshi:⁹ writing and disillusion

Mr Joshi is a middle-aged writer, experiencing some creative difficulties, who recalls his past as a teacher in a small village named Sunaulidhar. In particular, he remembers some episodes related to Professor Shashtiballabh Pant, better known as T-ta Professor, because of his way of pronouncing the white soldiers' salutation ('ta-ta'). Professor T-ta considered himself an authority on the English language and used to wander about with a notebook in his hand, just to

⁹ Manohar Shyam Joshi (1933-2006) was born in Ajmer (Rajasthan) into a Kumaoni Brahmin family from Almora (now in the state of Uttarakhand). He is often called the Father of Indian Soap Opera, since he was the scriptwriter of the first Indian TV serial, *Ham Log* (1982). A hugely popular show, this dealt with the everyday struggles of the Indian middle-class. A few years later Joshi created a new TV serial, *Buniyaad* (1987-1988), based on the story of a family of refugees during the Partition of India. He wrote screenplays for films like *Bhrashtachar*, *Appu Raja*, *He Ram* and *Nirrnadhin Zameen* and in some of these films he was also a dubber. He also worked as a journalist: after his first experience writing for *Jansatta* in Delhi, he became a contributor to *All India Radio* and *Films Division of India* in Mumbai. He became assistant to the acclaimed poet and writer Agyeya at *Dinman* magazine and was part of the editorial staff on *Saptahik Hindustan*, *Weekend Review* and *Morning Echo*. He wrote for *Outlook India*'s column *Outlook Saptahik* until his death in 2006. In his literary work, he dealt with a wide range of subjects: from love in *Kasap* to political satire in *Netaji kahin*. His best known novels include *Kuru Kuru Swaha* (1980), *Hariya Hercules ki Hairani* (1994), *Hamzad* (1999) and *Kyap*, an allegory of modern India, for which he won the Sahitya Akademi award in 2005. Unfortunately, his success as a scriptwriter for television has probably overshadowed his literary work.

write down any new English word he encountered. He was obsessed by sex and found potential erotic allusions in any subject. Because of this he had become the ideal character for a comic-erotic short story. Mr Joshi tried to win T-ta's trust by inventing improbable sexual experiences in order to gather as many details as possible about his private life. During one of their chats the Professor relates his sad story in what he called the 'widows' house'. Since his childhood Shashtiballabh had remained the only male in his family: he had been raised by his mother Ija, inconsolable after her husband's death, his presumptuous auntie Bubu and his sister-in-law Bhoju, with whom T-ta had his first sexual experiences. But Mr Joshi found himself unable to write anything: the two images of Shashtiballabh – sad orphan and lustful old man – were fighting against each other with no possible reconciliation. Some years passed and Mr Joshi had no more contact with people from Sunaulidhar. One day, during the funeral ceremony for a relative, he was informed of T-ta's death. He had suffered a heart attack on the first anniversary of his son's death. The novel ends with an impressive image: Mr Joshi standing on a river bank looking at a dead foetus floating on the water.

As previously mentioned, the main character and narrator (whose name is significantly the author's own name) is a storyteller suffering from writer's block. Within a story made up of amusing episodes with plenty of sexual allusions, Mr Joshi introduces a much deeper and more complex reflection on writing potentials. From the beginning of the novel we find noteworthy excerpts foregrounding a basic question: can words still be immortal?

'Poets must die when they're young and novelists be born only when they're old.' Can't recall where I read that line, or its author's name. God knows who wrote it: a failed middle-aged poet or a successful old novelist. Sounds more like the former, if you ask me.

... Look, successful or not, I am a middle aged novelist too, and although I may now write to live, I no longer live to write. All the stories I put off writing, because I waited for them to mature, have grown old along with me. In fact, they are as close to death as I am now. So what immortality can this dying baggage have?¹⁰

The narrator talks to his readers, expressing a painful and disenchanted point of view on life and on the role of writing. We can find some interesting similarities with Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. On one hand both novels are, at the same time, a comedy and tragedy. In Calvino's text we have a 'light plot' with two protagonists, the Reader and the Other Reader, who ultimately end up marrying; but the tragedy emerges through a reflection on the difficulties of writing and the solitary nature of reading. On the other hand Calvino, like Joshi, introduces his own double, an old writer named Silas Flannery, who reveals his intellectual crisis in a diary.

¹⁰ Manohar Shyam Joshi, *T'Ta Professor*, translated by Ira Pande (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008) 1. Subsequent references to this novel will be identified with initials TTP. The original Hindi text used for analysis is Manohar Shyam Joshi, *Manohar Shyam Joshi ke teen upanyas - Hariya Hercules ki Hairani, T-ta Professor, Hamzad* (Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 2008).

Returning to Mr Joshi's story, he recounts the sensations he used to experience through reading: he could burst out laughing or explode into tears and dreamt of recreating these same sensations in his future readers. In adulthood, however, the magic of words seems to have disappeared. Those unfinished stories of youth are growing old and slowly dying.

All those stories that I did not write in my youth have aged and died a little – like me – some outside me, and some within.

However, there were some promising stories that I looked at from time to time, to test their health, as it were. I raged against their ageing as I raged against mine. I have piles of dusty files with several opening chapters written between long gaps. All they seem to me now are mute reminders that both my imagination and handwriting have deteriorated over years. Among that collection of trash are also some luckless plots that took birth, developed, and died of suffocation in my mind even before they saw ink and paper.

What I am about to write is a requiem for just such a tale. (TTP 3-4)

This last line could be seen as an anticipation of one of the last images of the novel, which will be mentioned below. During the narration we can find several references to the impossibility of expressing properly in words the complexity of human nature and life. When Mr Joshi finds out about T-ta's painful past in the widows' house he feels paralysed. He continues to think about the three widows waiting for their *bhau* Shashtiballabh to come back from school: he would like to depict their sorrow and the innocence of that small boy. But this task appears impossible: every time the image of the old lustful man that Shashtiballabh had become insinuates itself into Mr Joshi's mind. Nothing can be interpreted in a simplistic way: for any fact, for any behaviour there could be multiple reasons. Every person is a multi-faceted entity, which must be considered from several points of view. Moreover, every story is filtered through the lenses of the narrator and of the listener (or reader) and this awareness makes any univocal meaning impossible.

On the last page of the novel we find a decisive metaphorical reference to a tale, prematurely dead, to which the narrator is dedicating his requiem. During the funeral ceremony of a relative, Mr Joshi is chatting with a young poet on the bank of a river. A crow is pecking at 'something' on the surface of the water.

'What are you watching there, sir?' he asked. 'It looks like some dead child's body. I'm sure it is someone's illegitimate child,' he added in a disgusted tone.

I looked carefully then, and he was right. The crow was feasting on a dead foetus. Things blurred before me and the cawing of the crow sounded, to me, like someone calling: 'T'ta.'

I couldn't tear my gaze away: The dead child's bloated body bobbing on the waves appeared to be asleep. A crow was singing it a lullaby and the lullaby had just two syllables: Kay-ne. Kay-ne. No-thing. No-thing. (TTP 138)

Mr Joshi cannot explain to the poet that he is staring at the substance of T-ta's life, whose story could not be told. He is staring at it 'as a child looks at his hand – without disgust or understanding – when he has smeared it with his own shit' (TTP 139).

3. *Kathgulab* by Mridula Garg:¹¹ writing to express female creative power

The novel is structured in five chapters depicting five different characters: Smita, Marianne, Narmada, Aseema and Vipin. Each of them recounts her/his individual experiences and traumas, but at the same time presents a different point of view on other characters' stories. I will focus on Marianne, the second character introduced by the author. She is an American sociologist, with a lively, artistic flair. As a child she suffered because of her selfish mother, who only cared about her appearance and money, so she married Irving Whitman, an aspiring novelist without any pragmatic interest. He asks her to help in his research in order to find materials for his 'perfect building', his great novel. He changes his mind continually, but in the end he finds a suitable subject: stories of women who migrated from Europe to America at different moments in history. After being persuaded by her husband to have an abortion, Marianne dedicates all her energies to this new project. She hands over to her husband the stories of four women, with the aim of helping him in the creation of a novel, which will be considered the result of their joint consciousness. However, when the novel is published with the title *Women of the Earth*, there is no recognition for Marianne's work. Her husband has taken away first her flesh and blood child and now her spiritual child. Marianne divorces and gradually tries to forget her hatred towards men. She remarries this time a more practical man with the aim of having three children. Unfortunately, after several miscarriages and analysis, she has to abandon her dream, and decides to adopt a child. Time goes by as legal procedures are completed, but finally a little girl is about to arrive in Marianne's house. Only at this moment does her husband reveal his real thoughts: he does not like little children, he already has two from his previous marriage and has no desire to repeat the experience. After this second divorce Marianne abandons the idea of motherhood as defined by tradition and frees her creative energy by writing novels.

As Anne Castaing points out, one of the fundamental themes of Mridula Garg's novel is the unresolved ideal of parenthood and the deconstruction of conventional female and male roles.¹² Even though the feminine identity is usually associated with motherhood, none of the main characters manages to conceive a child: Smita and Marianne experience the pain of abortion, Narmada dedicates her whole life to raising someone else's children and Aseema does not feel any desire for pregnancy until her menopause. Almost all the mothers that we encounter in the text are far from being positive figures devoted to their children: there is Namita, Smita's sister,

¹¹ Mridula Garg was born in Calcutta in 1938. After graduating she taught Economics in Delhi University for three years. During the 1980s she wrote a fortnightly column in a Calcutta magazine, *Ravivar*, and more recently, from 2003 to 2010, she collaborated with *India Today*. Her first short story, *Rukavat*, was published in *Sarika* magazine in 1971 and was followed by many others (a collection in two volumes of more than 80 short stories, *Sangati-Visangati*, was published in 2004), by three dramas and three collections of essays. Her first novel, *Uske Hisse ki Dhoop* was published in 1975 and caused quite a stir. It is in fact considered the first text in Hindi literature to call into question the sanctity of both arranged and love marriages, leading in a natural way to sexually uninhibited behaviours. Her principal novels include *Chittakobra* (1979; which led to her arrest on charges of obscenity), *Anitya* (1980), *Main aur Main* (1984) and *Miljul Man* (2009), for which she won the Sahitya Akademi award in 2013.

¹² See Anne Castaing, "'Gender Trouble' in the New Hindi Novel: The Ambiguous Writings on Womanhood in K. B. Vaid's *Lilā* and Mridula Garg's *Kathgulāb*", *Oriental Archive* 81, 2013, 67-88.

who spends very little time with her children and has a harsh attitude towards everybody; and Marianne's mother, who does not care about human relations, but only about appearance and money. While Smita and Aseema try to obviate their suffering through a life in close contact with nature and of social commitment, Marianne presents a different way to express female creative power: this is writing. After her first marriage, while writing the journals about emigrant women, she has a special experience, which we can read in the dialogue below with her husband:

'This, my dear Marianne, is the difference between academic and creative writing,' said he. 'We writers erect a big, perfect structure with our imagination but the slightest puff of ill wind can raze it to the ground. Isn't it a wondrous thing, this imaginary structure? We lay brick upon brick when there is not a brick in sight. The plan, the design, the materials ... all imaginary. Incredibly light and evanescent, but once the bricks have been cemented and the structure stands, nothing can bring it down until the Day of Judgement. The truth is revealed to you in an instant of blinding insight. If you lose your concentration and the wrong door swings open, the flame is extinguished leaving only the inky darkness of soot behind.' For a split second Marianne thought that Irving was talking about her. He had homed right in. This is exactly what had happened when she wrote the diaries of Ruth, Roxanne, Elena and Susan. The door of the cage had opened on its own. Freed from the constraints of facts, she soared lightly with the wind. With a snap of her fingers, she had fashioned bricks out of nothing and created a castle which was whole. This was her home, personal and intimate, which she owned in entirety.¹³

The fictional nature of literature is here wonderfully explained: a writer does not deal with pragmatic reality, he creates his own imaginary castle. There is no objective truth, but imagination and personal interpretations of experiences and feelings. This idea is strengthened by the very structure of the novel. In fact the five life stories are not simply juxtaposed but intertwined, and they propose alternative points of view on other characters' stories. Furthermore, in each chapter a first person and third person narrator alternate, creating a fascinating game of perspectives. It seems that, for each story, the initial dimension of self-referential narrative has to be transcended in order to put some distance between the events (especially traumatic events)¹⁴ and the characters. This complex structure highlights the importance of looking at any episode from several points of view, as there are no plain facts, but partial and subjective versions of the story.

¹³ Mridula Garg, *Country of Goodbyes*, translated by Manisha Chaudhry (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003) 70. Subsequent references to this novel will be identified with initials CG. The original Hindi text used here for analysis is Mridula Garg, *Kathgulab* (Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith, 2013).

¹⁴ We are reminded of the two abuses suffered by Smita: the first one presumably committed by her *jija* (Garg 2013: 19-24) and the second one by her American husband (Garg 2013: 49-55). Both of them are narrated by a third person narrator, as if similar traumatic experiences could not be confessed in the first person.

As mentioned previously, Irving uses Marianne's journals about emigrant women in the USA and publishes *Women of the Earth* under his own name, without even acknowledging his wife's contribution. This novel is defined as Marianne's stolen spiritual child: through this first image the writing process is associated with pregnancy, with the act of giving birth. Actually, Marianne will not try to write again until the end of her second marriage. Indeed, after several miscarriages and an unsuccessful attempt at adoption, she decides to seek personal realisation in writing her new, recognised novels. Through writing she can therefore free her female creative power. As Mridula Garg stated in an interview, 'There is no such thing as barren women. Any woman willing to nurture any one is a mother.'¹⁵ In this case it seems that Marianne has gone beyond nurturing human beings; she can experience an alternative form of motherhood through her art. This chapter is not only a celebration of the creative power of writing, but also an indictment of the male literary establishment. Marianne's husband is not the only writer to steal a woman's creative work; great names in the history of literature did the same to their wives (D.H. Lawrence and Scott Fitzgerald are explicitly mentioned within the novel as examples of this practice). Moreover, the majority of critics consider women to be essentially pragmatic, incapable of 'abstract thought and historical sense', as if there was not too much to expect from them (CG 84). Female voices are still subjugated by men and it is difficult to find space for women in a literary tradition dominated by patriarchy.

4. *Ek Naukrani ki Diary* by Krishna Baldev Vaid:¹⁶ writing to understand life and feelings

Shanti is a young maidservant who has had to interrupt her studies to start working and contributing to support her family. After her father's death, she lives with her mother and her sister Paro, who has had the courage to leave her drunken and violent husband. Her brother Kundan is also addicted to alcohol, and on many occasions he comes home to steal from his mother. Shanti works in several houses, but she develops a special relationship with two of her employers, the *akhbar-wala* (Newspaper Saab) and Mrs Varma. They both treat her with respect and do not try to give her leftovers or hand-me-down clothes: for them she is not just a maidservant but a person. Mrs Varma has suggested that she should begin writing about her experiences and thoughts: the novel is, in fact, created from the diary that Shanti is keeping. Shanti writes about her daily routine, her dreams and her fears; in a short time the diary becomes

¹⁵ The interview with Ambika Ananth is available on <http://www.museindia.com/viewarticle.asp?myr=2007&issid=12&id=627>.

¹⁶ Krishna Baldev Vaid was born in 1927 in Dinga (now Pakistan). He studied at the University of Punjab and completed his education at Harvard University with a PhD in English literature. He published several texts both in Hindi and in English, novels, collections of short stories, dramas and criticism. He translated texts by Beckett, Racine and Lewis Carroll into Hindi. His first novel, *Uska Bachpan* (1957), is now considered a classic and was translated by the author himself into English with the title *Steps in Darkness*. It is a realistic novel, dealing with Partition, which brought Vaid immediate success. Despite this, the author soon decided to abandon the path of realism, considering it inadequate in giving a voice to his imagination. Vaid's subsequent novels were, in fact, characterised by a desire for experimentation, transgression and by harsh irony. Among his most recent novels are *Bimal Urf Jayen to Jayen Kahan* (1974), *Guzra Hua Zamana* (1981), *Doosra Na Koi* (1978), *Kala Kolaj* (1989), *Lila* (1993), *Nar Nari* (1996) and *Mayalok* (1999).

an instrument by which she analyses herself and her world. In the second part of the novel Shanti leaves all her other jobs and moves to the home of Newspaper Saab and Mrs Varma (who have started living together). Unfortunately, after a few days she begins to worry about the choice she has made. Now she can sleep on a sofa and use a proper bathroom, but what will happen if she makes a mistake? One morning Shanti reads a terrible piece of news: an elderly couple has been killed nearby and their young maidservant has been accused of the murder. Shanti is upset. Mrs Varma and the Saab also seem to behave in a strange way. The girl hears her mistress wondering if Shanti suspects the maidservant and if she knows her. So not even Mrs Varma is free from prejudice. The following morning Shanti goes back home, leaving only a small note. She does not know exactly what she is feeling, but she can no longer remain in that house.

At first glance *Ek Naukrani ki Diary* could appear to be a 'simply narrated realistic story'. Actually, as Sagaree Sengupta, who translated the novel into English, points out, it should be considered as complex as other texts by Vaid.¹⁷ Within this fictional diary, in fact, the reader will not only find out about Shanti's daily routine, but will set out on a kind of journey through her inner world. She relates her dreams and aspirations, her fears and her doubts. Moreover, a fundamental element of the novel is the reflection on the meaning and the effects of writing. As the text proceeds, Shanti develops an increasing awareness of her ambivalent relationship with the diary. Sometimes she feels that she is just wasting her time, that nothing good will come from filling so many notebooks, but she cannot stop writing. The diary allows her to reflect on a number of subjects, to find relief from troubles and also to concentrate on her own body and on its sensations. Writing is like 'taking all your clothes off. Not just your clothes, but your skin. Not just your skin, but the skin off your thoughts too.'¹⁸ She is a young woman, with contradictory feelings. On one hand, she feels irritated at any man's lustful glance, but, on the other, she wishes to have her first sexual experience. Sometimes she feels that her body is on fire and touches on the secret pleasures that she is living in her dreams. However, she wants to avoid the experiences her mother and her sister had after marriage. Both their husbands were drunken, unemployed and violent; this is the reason why she keeps repeating, 'I'll never marry, I'll never have children'. Nevertheless, she cannot silence the impulses of her body and wonders what the future will bring to her. In particular, writing becomes a fundamental support after the shocking episode of a girl's suicide. Jharna was the eldest daughter of a Bengali family where Shanti used to work. She had a love affair with a Muslim boy, but her family firmly opposed it. After a clandestine abortion, the girl hanged herself in her room. A couple of days later newspapers reported the suicide of her boyfriend. The Bengali home was overwhelmed by sorrow and, in her diary, Shanti continued to wonder what had really happened in Jharna's heart. The girl knows

¹⁷ Sagaree Sengupta, 'The Diary of a Maidservant by Krishna Baldev Vaid,' *Indian Literature* Vol. 52, No. 3 (245) (May-June 2008) 224 http://www.jstor.org/stable/23340547?&seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents.

¹⁸ Krishna Baldev Vaid, *The Diary of a Maidservant - Ek Naukrani ki Diary* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007) 154. Subsequent references to this novel will be identified with initials DM. The present analysis is based on the original Hindi text, Krishna Baldev Vaid, *Ek Naukrani ki Diary* (Delhi: Rajpal, 2014).

that writing is a unique instrument enabling her to have a better understanding of her experiences and deepest feelings, a way to communicate with her own heart.

Writing here feels like talking to myself. It seems things have been sorting themselves out since I began to write in here. For instance, there are some things that I can write only here. And I can't write even those things down fully – it's as if there are parts of those things that remain buried inside me, or somewhere else. But these are such things that I never even feel like talking about them with anyone else. They're not even my private thoughts. They're something else entirely, and don't come from my mind. Actually, they're things that you understand only from writing about them. (DM 138)

During a meeting with the writer Geetanjali Shree, she dealt precisely with this issue. In today's world, human life is too complex to be properly and completely understood. In Shree's opinion we can only bear witness to what we experience: it seems that something is in the air and we know that we have to recount it, but how? In Vaid's text the sense of urgency of writing is compared even to a kind of possession:

I write down whatever comes to me. Sometimes I feel I'm not the one who writes, that the writing gets done by itself. Just like certain words escape your lips on their own. Just like a goddess or a ghost suddenly possesses some people. Just like some women fall into trance. Just like some crazy people go on talking to themselves for no reason. (DM 69)

5. Conclusion

The perspectives on the writing process which emerge from the above novels are heterogeneous and may even appear contradictory. If Joshi's text conveys a sense of disillusion and scepticism about the potential of writing, both Garg and Vaid propose a more optimistic view. In Garg's *Kathgulah* writing is a powerful instrument for self-realisation, while in Vaid's novel it becomes an essential device to better understand one's own inner and outer world. In the recent Hindi literary scene there are further novels characterised by self-reflexivity. *Kalikatha: Via Bypass* by Alka Saraogi or *Hamara Shahar Us Baras* by Geetanjali Shree are two of the most noteworthy examples. Nevertheless, in these texts one more ingredient has to be considered, that is the presence of history. On one hand both the novels can be read as national allegories, meaning stories of ordinary people that become representative of the state of the Indian nation. On the other, they imply a reflection on the fictional nature of official historiographic accounts.¹⁹ For these reasons, the two novels may represent a fruitful avenue for further investigation.

Despite the differences I have identified in the three novels which I have analysed, they share metafictional elements. Paying explicit attention to the writing process foregrounds the fictional nature of literature and of its projected worlds. These authors are aware of the complexity of the contemporary world and of the different kinds of fictional realities that we all experience in our

¹⁹ On the concept of historiographic metafiction see Linda Hutcheon, 'Historiographic Metafiction - Parody and the Intertextuality of History', *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 3-32.

daily lives. Joshi, Garg and Vaid perceive the impossibility of representing a monolithic reality or indisputable truth; they can only offer their personal view of life and of literature. All things considered, I identify a possible postmodern clue in this self-reflexive dimension. If we compare these texts to famous postmodern novels – such as those of Borges, Calvino or Nabokov – their metafictional experimentation is undoubtedly less radical and does not affect the perception of the story. However, as Wladimir Krysinski states, metafiction should not be considered as ‘a homogeneous mono referential discourse arising out of a limited series of problems linked to the narrative or novelistic process. Metafiction is rather a polyvalent problematisation of the critical, reflexive, analytical, or playful perspective of that which is narrated reflected upon itself’.²⁰

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²⁰ Wladimir Krysinski, ‘Borges, Calvino, Eco, the Philosophies of Metafiction’, *Literary Philosophers, Borges, Calvino, Eco*, ed. Jorge J.E. Gracia, Carolyn Korsmeyer and Rodolphe Gasché (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 186.

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