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**MULTIPLE VOICES OF THE NARRATIVE IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S LAST ORDERS**


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**Abstract:** The present paper throws light on multiple voices of the narratives in Graham Swift's *Last Orders*. The novel describes the events of the day trip from London to Margate, and interrupted frequently by the memories of the seven narrators. The narrative technique is complex as the dead character Jack joins in the narration. It is done by the characters with their first names as a chapter heading via their monologues. The novel is a series of interviewing monologues of a south London characters speaking an informal, lower middle class English dialect. The plot moves freely through time from 1930s to the 1990. Every character describes his or her relationships with others. Through their monologues the characters speak of history, secrets, conflict, complex relationships and metaphysics and so on. Multiple narration as a postmodern feature in fiction is clearly reflected in the present novel.

**Keywords:** monologue, multiple voices, narration, postmodern.

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**Introduction:** *Last Orders* is Graham Swift's sixth novel published in 1996. He received Booker Prize for this novel in the same year. Graham Swift is a contemporary British author and short story writer. He was born in London on 4<sup>th</sup> may, 1949. He is the fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the recipient of numerous prizes and honors. His *Shuttlecock* (1981), won a Geoffrey Faber Memorial Award in 1983, and *Waterland*, which was nominated for the prestigious Man Booker Prize, won the 'Guardian Prize' for 'Best English Novel in 1983.' He won the prestigious 'Man Booker Prize' in 1996 for his novel *Last Orders*. It was also made into a motion picture of the same name and shown first in 2002. He was a friend of Ted Hughes, the famous animal poet. In his novels, he deals with, the failed family relationships in especially in between father and daughter, husband and wife, grandparents and their grandchildren and among the friends. He frankly discusses the issues of sexuality, adultery, abortion, insect etc. which are very common practices in the western culture. His works has been translated into more than twenty-five languages. His most famous novels *Waterland* and *Out of This World* are based on troubled parent-child relationships. *Waterland* is one of the excellent post-war British novels. It has been translated in more than ten languages and prescribed as a text book in the English literature syllabus in some of the universities in England. The present Booker award winner novel, *Last Orders* (1996) criticized for having similarities in plot to William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Both novels are narrated in monologues by a lower middle class and less

educated people speaking informal dialect. Swift is concerned more with psychological discovery of his characters. At the same time he deals with various themes and techniques in his novels. As a result, he has established himself as one of England's leading and prominent contemporary writers. There are multiple narrations by different characters in *Last Orders*.

M.H. Abrams, in his 'A Glossary of Literary Terms' defines narrative as, 'A narrative is a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do. Some literary forms such as the novel and short story in prose, and the epic and romance in verse, are explicit narratives that are told by a *narrator*. In drama, the narrative is not told, but evolves by means of the direct presentation on stage of the actions and speeches of the characters.'

In *Last Orders* there is a story, which is told in prose. It has events from First World War to recent past and there are seven characters in it. These characters speak about themselves and they perform something. Three friends gather together in a local pub drinking and thinking about the memories of their dead friend, Jack. It is Jack's wife Amy who requests them to chuck off the ashes of her husband in the deep Margate Pear as per his last (order) wish. The title of the novel *Last Orders* refers to the last order or last wish of Jack, who is London based butcher. As per the view of Ray Johnson, one of the narrators Jack wants his ashes to be chucked off the end of Margate pier. The title also refers to the location from which the journey to Margate starts. It is a local pub in

Bermondsey, South London where three friends of Jack and his adopted son order their last drink before board on their trip to Margate. These three friends of Jack are very close to him. All are in their late sixties. They are Ray Johnson, an insurance clerk and gambler, Vic Tucker, the undertaker, and Lenny Tate, the ex-boxer. One more character is there who have equal importance; their driver namely Vince Dodds. He is the motor dealer and adopted son of Jack and Amy.

The novel is divided into seventy five chapters and each chapter is headed with either the name of the speaker or name of the place. Major narration is done by Ray Johnson. He gives twenty two monologues under his own name and seventeen with place names. Vince Dodds delivers twelve monologues whereas Lenny and Vic give eight each. M.H. Abrams, in his 'A Glossary of Literary Terms' defines monologue as; 'A monologue is a lengthy speech by a single person.' In the present novel there are lengthy speeches of characters as there are some exceptions to it. All the narrators usually deliver their monologues to no one in particular. In *Last Orders* every character speaks to no one, apart from themselves. No one listen them. Their monologues pass each other. The narrators are always a sad, middle-aged or older person looking into the unhappy past finding himself. There is always a movement backward and forward between the narrator's present and the past events. Female narrators are very rare in all Swift's novels; here in *Last Orders* Amy and Mandy speaks for a while. It is an outstanding feature of the novelist that at some points in certain novels the dead character speaks. Matthew Pearce speaks through his journal in *Ever After*, but Anna speaks directly to the reader after her death in *Out of This World*, and Jack in *Last Orders*. Even Willy is dead by the time he completes his narration in *The Sweet-Shop Owner*. When we analyze the language that characters use through their monologues is homogeneous informal and lower middle class English. The social background of all these characters may be responsible for their homogeneous language as they all belong to lower middle class and working class environment.

All characters tell their story in their concerned narration and reveal the truth about themselves and others in a sense there is a conflict. We, as a reader come to know various secrets. For example, Ray had a brief affair with Jack's wife, Amy in the 1960s. Vince, adoptive son of Jack and Amy impregnates Lenny's

daughter Sally. It results in an abortion and followed by disasters in her life. Jack and Amy had mentally retarded daughter: June, who spends fifty years in asylum and surprisingly Jack never visits her but Amy does it twice a week. In a sense Jack denies her existence. Ray's wife Carol leaves him and Susie, his daughter goes to Australia without caring of her father in his old age. It is very difficult to understand the complexity, disappointment, failure and conflict. The memories of the characters are not in any linear sequence or order but rather they interweave.

History and historical events are main concern in most of Swift's novels. Here, in this novel it is so. Most of the characters are part of historical events and processes. For example, Ray describes himself in Libya and Egypt during the World War II as a "Small man at big history" (90). Lenny fails in his business as well as in boxing because of the war. He loses his father also due to war and lack of savings. Vince served in British Army but his original parents died in a V-1 attack on London in 1944, later on he was adopted by Jack and Amy. Ray, Jack and Lenny survive the war in North Africa. Vic has witnessed the war in the Royal Navy. Amy also describes her experiences of bombing of London through her monologue. Apart from war other historical events also finds their place in the novel as Mandy and Vince live through the cultural and social changes of the 1960s in Britain. The characters are awfully aware about history and its impact on their lives and that of others.

In *Last Orders* the narrators are reflective. Throughout their monologues they often think about a wide range of aspects of human existence. Their observations on existential issues are common and predictable. They do not restrict their speculations to everyday matters of the world. They do not only think about the mortal world only but about metaphysical reflection too. They wonder about the immortality of the human soul. From early on in the car journey to Margate—from when Vince asks Lenny, "So you think he [Jack] does know? You think he can see us?" (31). The four major narrators constantly worry about the metaphysical survival of identity. They are also seen doing worry of existence of God and plan to this Universe. They all are obsessed by transience. A fantastic thought reflects through their deed of journey to Margate Pear from London suburb as per the last wish of their friend: Jack that a physical body is mortal but human soul is

immortal. The companions carry one of the ultimate symbols of human transience with them to Margate—their friend's ashes (16,283). When the three companions finally scatter the ashes of their friend they are "Like smoke" (294). The substantial Jack becomes insubstantial. At last, they perform a ritual of scattering the ashes of their friend, Jack.

**Conclusion:** In *Last Orders* through monologues characters reveal their past as well narrate the story. Every character in the novel is a narrator. They usually deliver their monologue to no one in particular apart from themselves. The striking aspect of the novel is dead Jack joins in the narration. No

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