CHAPTER II

PARODY AS PLOT
Parody has been called "parasitic and derivative" (Hutcheon 1985:3). Perhaps the term 'parasitic' and 'derivative' are used to signify their dependence on the earlier texts. Parody is not defined as a ridiculing imitation to invoke laughter as mentioned in the Dictionary. A parody need not always make fun of an earlier text, it may sometimes offer a much wider perspective. For example in Joyce's Ulysses, while the Odyssey is clearly the parodied text here, it is not one to be mocked at or ridiculed but rather it is to be seen "as an ideal or at least as a norm from which the modern departs" (Hutcheon 1985:5).

Parody is not a new concept altogether. It has been with us since Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy. With these two novels, there came about the dynamic activity of intertextuality and self-representation which influenced modern writing in a big way. The very fact that both the texts allow a wide diversity of critical approaches testifies to their influence upon twentieth century writings. Among modernist writers, Eliot, Woolf, Joyce and others use parody in their work. Virginia Woolf's Orlando for example, is a parody on writing a biography. In this novel, she exposes the pretentious style and solemn pedantry that biographer go for rather than presenting any real
insight of the lives they deal with. Parody in modernist works is sustained by their style and to some extent by decorum too. Such technical styles sustaining parody are no longer seen in postmodern writings for the parodic form has turned intensely radical now. This is what I call subversion of the familiar staples of both modernist and realist fiction.

The Forsterian expectations of how a novel should be organized certainly become unworkable in Nathanael West's fictional works. The proper Aristotelian division of a beginning, middle and an end gets diffused as soon as the novel begins. With this break, the novel enters into a new domain of writing which is rather more complex. In the absence of so called organized 'plots', it is parody which pushes the narrative. Parody brings about a direct confrontation with the form of the novel and the problems related to it. Such an art destabilizes and diffuses conventions in parodic ways, ... "self consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and of course to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past" (Hutcheon 1988:23). So in the light of the above claims, it is necessary to analyse and examine how West uses the superimposing structure of parody to push the plot forward or to organize his plot.
Parody is one of the major stylistic devices in both modernist and postmodernist works. When we consider parody, we need not always relate it to fiction because parodic form of art is now popularly seen in modern forms of art like films, music, painting, television serials and even in comic strips. No fixed definition can be offered to define parody; in fact Hutcheon suggests that the concept of parody must be broadened to fit the requirements of the art of our century (Hutcheon 1985:11).

This broadening aspect of parody is very much applicable to West's works, for he does not use parody to simply mock at past writings. His works, true to their experimental nature, suggest a definition of parody or rather relocate parody in a broader sense. The failure of a systematic working of plot makes way for parody in West. His art failed to sustain itself during the thirties because the nature of his writing jolted the complacent mindset of readers during that period. But I would not term this as West's failure for he was only trying to present the ills of the contemporary American society. His works depicted the malaise that was inherent in the world at large and in America in particular. West, as early as the thirties could envision and foresee the radical changes that America was undergoing. Though the theme of 'failure' predominates his
works, West is not obsessed by such negative values. It becomes imperative for West to employ nightmarish and repugnant images for only such images could vividly expound a demented and sterile world. West therefore uses parody to portray the ills of a decadent and fragmented society.

Modernism is the launching pad for all the four novels - (1) The Dream Life of Balso Snell, (2) Miss Lonelyhearts, (3) A Cool Million, and (4) The Day of the Locust. Though West is not fully skeptical of Modernist aesthetics, he is aware of the uncertainties that beset a modern mind. His fictional works are delicately balanced on a scale that inclines more towards the end of Modernism. The complacently balanced world receives a jerk in West's novels. Miss Lonelyhearts' joke to be a saviour is jerked into rude consciousness intensified even more by the self-realization of his helpless state just as Homer's passivity in The Day Of the Locust is jerked into violence bordering on madness and the irrational. Nathanael West's works in their play of parody and irony radicalize the doubts and uncertainties that Modernism faces. The complexity lies in the fact that while it looks inwards and is introverted, it is capable of criticising that art which it seeks to describe.

The self-reflexive art of fiction is an important form of parody. Fiction turned intensely introverted
directing its focus upon the self. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce wrote fiction that transcended all limitations of simple realism and probed into the consciousness to explore a more intense realism which the earlier texts failed to do. This kind of introverted realism which presented reality through the orders of modern consciousness underwent a radical change. The degree of self-analytical presentation became markedly radicalized; its obsessions with itself could only be presented through the use of parody and irony.

The aspect of experimentation reverberates very strongly in all his four novels. West experiments with new forms of art such as Dadaism, Surrealism and Freudianism in all his four novels. These experimental forms of art evoke disparate images or rather strike a discordant note with the earlier forms of writings. What makes West's continuity with these new forms of art rather than with traditional writing is his central preoccupation with the extreme primal impulses of the irrational and the non-representable. One of the repercussions of intense and radical experimentation in West results in self-reflexivity. As discussed earlier, the novel that parodies and reflects upon its own structure has been with us since Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy though the form was not developed further until the 1920's.
Parodic self-consciousness is presented through the works of Nathanael West. His first novel *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is heavy with parodic undertones for it is at heart a parody of the literary pretensions in which man is imprisoned by logic and reason. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* then becomes the perfect vehicle of parody and self-reflexivity just as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is a great vehicle of self-expression. "The wooden horse was inhabited solely by writers in search of an audience" (CWNW 1957:37). This tone of self-reflexivity reverberates throughout the novel. This aspect of self-scrutiny is rendered more intense for it deals with the illogicality of a man's dream life which becomes more irrational and diffusive as one dream overlaps with the other, exploding finally into a nightmarish failure. The self-conscious artist is also seen through the little dramas of Beagle Darwin's consciousness in which Janey Davenport is the actor. In his musings he replays the entire scene in his unconscious mind and ponders what his reaction ought to be for every action that is replayed. Such a solipsistic form of art is parodied in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. He is the performer throughout who must laugh at himself and if the laugh is bitter, he must laugh at the laugh (CWNW 1957:27).

*The Dream Life of Balso Snell* continues the self-
parodic mockery throughout. The artist is emotionally incapacitated for he cannot escape his own watchful eye. He is imprisoned by his vigilant gaze to such an extent that all his expressions turn into a parody of himself. The artist here is the extreme kind of Eliot's espousal-poet as critic, artist as critic. As a result the artist becomes a tough critic of himself and cannot escape the clutches of his own self-consciousness. Every movement here is associated with literary burlesque which collapses into parody. M.A. Klug's pertinent statement highlights the parody beneath every action in Balso - "Every action, whether it be spent in shaving, making love or killing the next-door neighbour, gets entangled in literary associations and collapses into parody, the ironic admission of the artist's bondage to the dead faces of the past which have usurped the present" (Klug 1987:19). The past no longer remains a complacent picture for it becomes a mocking, jeering audience. Therefore, in every gesture of his life and work, he becomes a self-conscious performer.

The acute self-consciousness on the part of the artist results in superficial poses. This in a way gives perspective for judging the unreality of the presence. "In Borges' stories, for example, technique of reflexiveness and self-parody suggests a universe in which human consciousness
is incapable of transcending its own mythologies" (Graff 1979:55). Again Borges's "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" predicts the unreality of the very world that is presented. Though not with the same intensity, the presentation of West's works strikes at the root of unreality - an unreal world inhabited by characters who are all performers in one way or the other. The likes of John Gilson, Harry Greener, Lemuel Pitkin provides this very aspect in his works. John Gilson in The Dream Life of Balso Snell cannot free himself from his watchful eye and this is evident in the following metaphor, "It is as if I were attempting to trace with the point of a pencil the shadow of the tracing pencil. I am enchanted with the shadow's shape and want very much to outline it; but the shadow is attached to the pencil and moves with it; never allowing me to trace its tempting form" (CWNW 1957:16). This is a pointer to denote acute frustrations involved in the study of the self. Just as the pencil and the shadow cannot be separated, he cannot release himself from his own vigilant gaze. Harry Greener in The Day of the Locust parallels the parody of John Gilson but in a different sense. The domination of the conscious mind is undeniably strong that even at the hour of death he can hardly separate his mechanical gestures from the real one. Faye Greener is an even greater performer, she strikes different superficial poses and emotes meaningless gestures.
In the funeral of her father, Harry Greener, Faye wilfully makes a show of an affectionate daughter. She demonstrates and manipulates the tone of her supposedly pathetic 'moans'. This particular show is actually devoid of any real emotions that could be associated with the death of a loved one. Lemuel Pitkin in *A Cool Million* is also a pathetic performer. He must perform till the final show is over. In the light of the above discussion we can observe that the self-mocking parody is undeniably linked with the presentation of a world that is superficial and unreal.

This strain of mockery is the underlying feature in each of his novels. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the sense of mockery is heightened right from the beginning through the letters. 'Desperate', 'Sick of it all', etc. create a mockery of the universe that (these fragmented, depressed selves) inhabit. They put forward various questions which dismantle the reader so intensely that the reader himself is abruptly awakened to be pitted against a cruel, distorted and mangled universe. This very strain of mockery, according to Linda Hutcheon, is associated with parody (Hutcheon 1988:34). Balso Snell, mocks at writers and their literary works. Balso enters the Trojan Horse through the posterior end which itself is a direct mockery of the world of art that writers inhabit. This pseudo-journey that Balso
undertakes ends nowhere; it explodes into self-mockery and a parody of a brash experimentation of illogicality and futility of a man's dream life. Such a parodic form is structured within a dream-upon-dream complexity. This same twist of parody is continued in *A Cool Million*. Lemuel Pitkin who leaves home in search of a fortune is misguided, deceived, deluded, dismembered and finally killed. This signifies a mockery of the American dream of success. *A Cool Million* is in many ways a parody of the American ideals of community and oneness. But such a lofty dream turns terribly ridiculous and culminates in a nightmarish failure. Such violent self-mockery and burlesque stretching Lem's adventure to an extreme end echoes a profound truth as suggested by Kingsley Widmer - "mocking the gross American costuming in innocence and a lashing out against the contradictory and fraudulent American culture and society" (Widmer 1982:65).

Beneath the motif of self-mockery and burlesque lie acute intricacies that are not meant to be resolved but are to be held in an ironic tension. In this context, I would categorize West as an artist fascinated by what is difficult and paradoxical. The ironic tension becomes taut in *Miss Lonelyhearts* for there are such an amazing number of unresolvable paradoxes. Its main narrative is structured
upon a pattern of stating questions, a structure that is foregrounded on enigmatic truths and quests almost verging on the grotesque. Miss Lonelyhearts is located amidst these unresolvable and diffusive queries. There are no logical solutions to questions like - 'What did I do to deserve such a fate?', 'What is the stinking business for?', 'How can I have faith in this day and age?', 'When the salt has lost its savour, who shall savour it again?' (CWNW 1957:67, 110, 125). Such questions foreshadow a deep and poignant query about the very construct of universe and man. This self-mockery is complicated by the fact that the characters, especially Miss Lonelyhearts, are incapacitated and shaken by such agencies presented in the form of letters. West's characters are non-evolving and mute according to Robert Emmet Long. He sees a "distinct affinity with the characters in Beckett's plays, who cannot evolve to the point of self-recognition or to a mastery of themselves or the world" (Long 1985:155). This 'mute' state in West aggravates as the questions multiply for they demonstrate the insubstantiality or the slipperiness of the novel's movement - art of unrest offering only questions but no final answers. The entire novel works to problematize such tensions for the real truth and the real answer diffuses into its dark enigmatic nature.

The presence of such glaring and poignant questions
becomes a reality in West. But reality collapses into parody, mocking the very aspect of uncertainty and unrest upon which the novel is structured. In Miss Lonelyhearts, the casually oriented expectation of a supposed 'saviour' of the depressed and the unfortunate lot becomes subverted. Subversion takes the form of parody here. Miss Lonelyhearts becomes a parody of a columnist who is supposed to ease the troubled and perplexed mind with his advice. The reader's expectation of a conventional detective story is subverted but nevertheless it is a quest to solve the unsolvable in a world beset with untold perplexities and uncertainties. All possible landmarks to solve the mystery are destroyed and the novel itself becomes an anti-detective novel. The question gets more embroiled in the mystery that he himself is turned into a victim of his own deception. Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose is also an anti-detective novel shrouded in mystery. Both the novels violently frustrate the reader's expectations of a detective novel - what Bertens and Fokkema state perhaps could be applicable here i.e., "it refuses to solve the crime and refuses to offer a totalized world of order and patterning" (Bertens & Fokkema 1986:21).

Ironic inversion perhaps could be a characteristic of parody seen in West's novels. A closer reading of his text shows a subtle inversion or rather an imitation of the
conventions of the earlier text. The description of Fay Doyle's 'undressing' likened to the 'sea sounds' is in a sense a parody of the seventeenth century metaphysical conceits. The episode in the final chapter of *The Day of the Locust*, the sign of "Mr. Kanh A Pleasure Dome Decreed" is Coleridge's reversal of the romantic imagination in "Kubla-Khan". In Robert Emmet Long's words "The assumptions of a transcendent world far above reality are mocked by the sterility implied to exist in the film industry" (Long 1985: 17). In a similar vein the chapter "Miss Lonelyhearts and the countryside" is another inverted irony of the Romantic notion of escape into the unreality. Wordsworth's obsessions to seek refuge in nature as an escape from harsh reality is echoed in Miss Lonelyhearts' trip to the countryside with Betty. The 'idyllic' picture of nature which Romantic writers glorified through their writings are rather dark and sterile in West. The ironic parody here reaches a crescendo because instead of being rejuvenated and renewed, Miss Lonelyhearts turns back even more morose, confused and ill-humoured. It is a parody which Linda Hutcheon described as "a form of imitation but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text ... Parody is a ... repetition with critical distance, which makes differences rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 1985:5-6).
Subversion and inversion of the familiar staples of earlier writings are a part of parody. Ironic subversion is projected neatly by Thomas Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Here the name Oedipa Maas has no direct connotation with the Greek tragedy. We are shown how the subversion works in the sense that Oedipa Maas is supposed to be a woman yet her name echoes the name of a classical hero Oedipus. Similarly all the traditions of an experimental art inverts the intellectuality by parodying the conventional truth and its significance. It signifies a break from an intelligible domain by parodying its respect for reason and logicality. In West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the domain of logical reasoning shifts violently under the pressure of irrational and rampant exhibition of self parody. This novel mocks at an established world order monitored by reason and logic. Such a world is denied freedom for it is imprisoned by logical thinking and reasoning. Reason and logic in West's fictional world are rendered immobile for they are not considered as potential remedies to heal an emotionally and mentally distorted universe. Adorno together with Horkheimer while "reflecting on the difficulties in the concept of reason termed it as "the court of judgement of calculation", "ratio of capital", instrument of domination, and means for the most rational exploitation of nature" (Burger 1984: XVI).
The collapse of all logic and reason results in a direct confrontation with the explosion of the irrational and the process of dehumanization that has permeated into the world at large. The general symptom of malaise in West is characteristic of the larger ills present in the society. All expressions of meaning and logic not only fails but explodes into parodies of themselves. Malcolm Bradbury considers Balso as a parodic and nightmarish comedy generating into a world of massive literary pastiche and artistic self-mockery (Bradbury 1991:342) and this is an inevitable symptom of the malaise exploding into literary pastiche. A world constructed on dreams and nightmares is a frenzy and a complex world which could never be presented neatly through structures of a sequential plot pattern. West's fictional imagination cannot adhere to any set norms like the traditional notions of plot, simple and lucid description of characters and straightforward narration. Therefore, in the absence of any of these, it is parody which sustains the structure in West's novels. In Balso Snell, we see every gesture collapses into parody. Here, even art is reduced to mere excremental images and also further scatological images are used to mock at art and literary pretentions.

The depiction of the past and the present merges into
an inhuman order of disintegration and violence bordering on the grotesque which explodes into parody in West. For this reason West is considered a pessimistic writer who is so obsessed with the decadent life of both the present and the past. But in so doing West conducts a study of both the elusive past and present just as Joyce probes time in relation to the elusive present. Though the attack on past writings are not so conspicuous in West, I have shown in my discussion how West in subtle ways parodies the past romantic writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge. West's biographer, Jay Martin, reveals to the readers the pent-up raw violence hidden for so long beneath the romantic surface. West's works in a profound manner attempt to release such pent-up forces that could neither be understood or controlled just as the release of the mindless and numberless locusts created havoc and rampant destruction that could not be controlled. In the light of the ongoing discussion we see that Nathanael West gibes at the ridiculous style of degenerate romances and this enables him to create situations that are profoundly parodic. Don Quixote is a precursor of such a legacy. There is a constant play of parody here "owing to the perpetual contrast between Don Quixote's noble nature and absurdities he forms from his surfeit of romances" (Cervantes 1979:26).
Milan Kundera considers Cervantes' *Don Quixote* a founder of modern era (Kundera 1993:15) and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* an important eighteenth-century novel that reaches the heights of playfulness and lightness never scaled before (Kundera 1993:15). Their contemporaries abandoned the possibilities opened up by these two masterpieces and it is only in the Postmodern period that both Cervantes and Sterne are continually being relocated in the context of the present times. In the twentieth century, we also see a resurgence of interest in West because his techniques are considered similar to those of *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*. West's works break free from the seeming notion of verisimilitude. The self-conscious representation in both Cervantes and Sterne influenced West's fictional works in a big way. The Westian man is pitted against a world he can no longer recognise. The image of God slowly losing control over the universe and its order of values is being presented vividly by Milan Kundera. Hence it is into such a world that the Westian man is let loose or rather imprisoned. Moreover, he is also imprisoned by his own conscious self so that every gesture or movement he makes collapses into parody. For example, Beagle Darwin in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* replays the little drama of Janey Davenport's suicide in his unconscious mind and ponders as to what his reaction ought to be. The tough self
critic in West juxtaposes to the presentation of double Don Quixote's and Sancho Panza's in Part II of Cervantes' Don Quixote. The first two remain fictional characters while the other two who live outside the story judge and criticize what has been written about them. In the modern period, Don Quixote is being increasingly viewed as a Postmodern work. So, West by following in the tradition left by Cervantes' and others perhaps could be considered as a writer foreshadowing Postmodernism.

Every novel says to the reader: "Things are not as simple as you think" (Kundera 1993:18). This is the standpoint upon which West's fictional works are based. It does not believe in the organizing capacity of the imagination nor does it have any confidence in imposing love and order in an otherwise chaotic world. In the contemporary age, we are grappling with such unresolved, mystified and decentered aspects of novel writing which tend to be unsettling. Since West deals with the experimental self, his characters are unthinkable and unrepresentable as living beings. In this way, West's novel reconnects itself with Don Quixote who is unthinkable as a living being. Ihab Hassan states that Modernism "created its own forms of Authority", whereas Postmodernism "had tended towards Anarchy, in deeper complicity with things falling apart" (Calinescu 1977:142).
Nathanael West, in presenting the unrepresentable and the unthinkable, leans more towards the latter part of Hassan's claim. Therefore, we see that West is being increasingly viewed as a precursor of Postmodernism.
WORKS CITED


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