

The Reality Dilemma in Postmodernism: A Postmodern Take on Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel"

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Abstract

This study provides a postmodern analysis of Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel", with a focus on the concept of reality in the postmodern era. The postmodern period is marked by its embrace of chaos and the search for meaning within distorted systems. However, this search has altered the traditional understanding of reality, accepting a fragmented and perverted version instead. The research hypothesizes that the coexistence of physical and virtual realities has generated non-existent signifiers that disrupt the system's foundation. This analysis highlights the emergence of fractured ideologies that reject original truths. Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, where reality becomes mere representation, serves as the theoretical framework. Baudrillard's assertion that reality is no longer reachable parallels Albert Camus' absurd philosophy, which underscores the conflict between human expectations and the realities of life. This paper employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing secondary sources such as scholarly books, articles, journals, and multimedia to analyze Borges' narrative. The findings suggest that the text reflects the postmodern crisis of reality, demonstrating the collapse of stable meaning in favor of fragmented, hyperreal constructs. This new knowledge enhances our understanding of how postmodernism disrupts and redefines reality, leading to a broader acceptance of chaos and uncertainty. The study concludes that the postmodern condition reshapes reality into an elusive and distorted concept, reflective of the contemporary human experience.

Keywords: Absurdism, Fragmentation, Hyperreality, Ideology, Postmodernism

1. Introduction

Imagine yourself wandering through an old library- one that is in the middle of nowhere- with the smell of fresh books mingling with the old ones, the surprisingly magnetic aroma of stale coffee, the silence mediated by the sound of pages turning, and finally the stories that are just waiting to be read. Undoubtedly, this will be a bookworm's paradise. But what if you discovered that you were literally standing in the middle of infinity, with words hanging over your head and books enslaving you rather than freeing you? Undoubtedly that paradise will no longer feel like one. Jorge Luis Borges, one of the prominent writers of Latin American Literature, was highly appreciated for his mind-twisting works that portrayed human existence for what it is, intricate and intriguing. "The Library of Babel" is such work where assessment of human value and reason is portrayed through the actions of a utopian library. People lived, died, and believed for the library to be an escape from the postmodern reality, one that is

jagged and hazy. In other words, the library was that ladder by which humans isolated themselves voluntarily so that they do not have to face reality, hence making up their own reality in an unrealistic world. The idea of ‘Simulacrum’, is understood as something that replaces reality with its representations, which is closely related to Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality. According to him, the modern world is a simulation where fiction takes the place of reality. The imitation is up to that point where it is impossible to distinguish between the real and unreal. From examples like media contents, reality shows, overly advertised products, Baudrillard proposes a state that exists between real and unreal. The state itself precedes the existence of an original state creating a ‘hyperreal reality’. French philosopher Albert Camus’ works function as the aftermath of the reality dilemma where humans are stuck in a maze of choices eventually accepting the absurd that is their reality. Borges’ library can be viewed as that hyperreal state that swallows not only the people around but itself in the name of escapism.

2. Problem Statement

Focusing on the arena of postmodernism, this paper includes the notions of Baudrillard’s idea of the hyperreal to prove that Borges’ library is in fact an unrealistic universe.

3. Literature Review

Initially along with many works of Borges, “The Library of Babel” was viewed under the mirror of absurdism and existentialism. In fact, it was thought of as a library that brings out the perspectives of reality in both the modern and postmodern world. ““The Library of Babel” is not dissimilar to the promises and realities of the contemporary library in a postmodern world” (Maier-O’Shea). In addition, it was viewed as a modern work of art that is optimistic in nature. In later years when postmodernism was at its peak, interpretations for this text started evolving. “Oscillating between two literary movements, Borges’ fiction resembles a borderland, where he stands as both a protagonist of modernism and a seer of postmodernism” (Keiser). Because it was written in the modern era and interpreted the best in postmodern era, the text holds a transitional spirit of philosophy which makes the text even more postmodern than modern. “Given the story’s interplay of features from both literary movements, I will argue that Borges can be seen as a transitional figure, wistfully reconstructing reassuring stability of the past through narrative craftsmanship while simultaneously posing the questions that such thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes would discuss in later years” (Keiser). In this sense Borges was ahead of its time as he could foresee what the world was going to turn into. Baudrillard based his entire theory of simulacra on Borges’ description of territory and its map. “Foucault and Baudrillard map ideas from Borges’ “The Library of Babel” to develop and illustrate important segments of their theory. Hexagonal galleries, labyrinths of paper, endless rows of books, bookshelves, and corridors inspire these theoreticians’ different discursive practices of defining, describing, and mapping the world” (Vrbančić). Also, it is said to be more postmodern because of the structure infused in the universe in the shape of a library. At first glance, it will not prove to be nothing more than a regular library that adds and gets rid of books accordingly. “One characteristic of postmodernism is a resistance to hierarchy and control. Librarians have a tradition of collecting, naming, and organizing physical objects according to a classification scheme with corresponding subject headings. Little flexibility is provided for interdisciplinary resources. When we no longer need a physical object, we weed it and follow the rules for deaccession” (Maier-O’Shea). It cannot be denied that the library was an actual storehouse of

knowledge and was in fact a complete library. It was an institution that allowed librarians to think freely and extract meaning from the works that existed. Instance of this is the ‘man of the book’ who, if not taken in a negative point of view, had all the knowledge of the world. “In all its forms, the library should lead us to think differently about the possibility of originality or novelty. It was self-evident to the librarians in the Library of Babel that they could never create an original work; instead, they hoped to discover the truth in the prefabricated texts they considered divine” (Basile). When the librarians failed to decode a stable meaning of the existing knowledge, everything started to fall apart. Humans have always practiced a need to be a complete personality. The book of Vindication made the librarians remember that they are not a complete but disintegrated entity, and this drove them insane, literally. “Man is in search of meaning. Given that meaning is arbitrary, then, there is uncertainty. Borges, one who primarily comments on his own work, exercises the just manifestation of a writer to partially address this phenomenon” (Magan). This is what raised the notion of reality among the readers. They began to wonder about the originality and validity of the library along with the reason behind the madness that comes with it. This gave birth to an anxiety of not being able to fully decipher at the same time understand the essence of the library. “The tension between a wish for totality and the conviction of failure is likewise evidenced by the story’s ending. In his attempt to create an autotelic work, the narrator proposes to solve the paradox of the library’s infinitude and its finite number of combinations by stating that it “is periodic.”” (Keiser). Because of its nature being fictional, Borges had to end the story in an optimistic note so that the readers would internalize the true motive reality in its unreal view. “Borges suggests that while every explanation of reality’s nature is a possibility, even unseen or spiritual ones, certainty about any vindication is impossibility” (Magan).

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Baudrillard’s Haze of the Hyperreal: “There have always been two traditions in philosophy. One asserts that there are truths that are universal and eternal. They stand outside history and the physical world and are transcendental. The other school claims that the world is physical and historical and that any truth we arrive at about it is equally historical, equally located within the physical universe” (Ryan). In his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard applies a Jorge Luis Borges narrative (‘On the Exactitude of Science’) about imperial cartographers who created a map that was so comprehensive and accurate that it covered the entire empire, existing in a one-to-one relationship with the region beneath it. To put it simply, the map was being considered as the actual empire by its inhabitants. So, when the map began to shred and tatter, the actual deserted region was disclosed leaving only the frayed map as a representation of reality. Where a territory is supposed to precede the map, it was the map that began to precede the territory, a phenomenon that is concerning and detrimental for the concept of reality. “Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard). This questionable state of reality was named simulation or simulacra- “Simulation is the norm of postmodernity, according to Baudrillard. We live in an age saturated with images, maps, models and signs that have become ends in themselves, and for which we have never known originals. Thus, we only have signs without an external reality, copies without originals” (Nayar). As a result, the picture, the copy, and the photograph make up what we know to be reality because we are unable to know anything else. Since there is no such thing as the “real”, the process of creating an image, manufacturing copies, and reflecting light is more significant in this

simulation. However, in postmodernism, language generates reality rather than just reflecting or labeling it; it is a constructive force. Additionally, since signifiers have the ability to convey meaning, the potential of the signified is eliminated since in the postmodern era, there are only signifiers and surfaces, and nothing else (Klages). Given that deconstruction holds that language is what shapes us and that there is no way to transcend it, it seems very crucial that we find new methods to extend language. We exist- we think, we see, and we feel- within the language into which we were born; there is no escaping language or the play of signifiers (Tyson). The most renowned aspect of Simulacra and Simulation is the analysis of these signifiers and their connection to reality. Baudrillard believed that human experience is not the reality but the simulation of reality. As signs and their respective signifiers have taken over the reality, meaning can be made only through the representation. Furthermore, these simulacra are concealing the notion that reality does not exist at all. “The grand sweep of this kind of rhetoric has a strong appeal. One might see it as a kind of latter-day Platonism, its devotees enjoying the mystical insight that what is normally taken as a solid and real world is just a tissue of dreamlike images” (Barry).

4.2 Camus’ Acceptance of Absurdity: In Albert Camus’ essay ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’, he retold the narrative of Sisyphus, a mythological figure, bound to roll a boulder up the side of a mountain to its summit for eternity. Here, Camus expressed the aftereffect of awareness. Humans are constantly in dilemma between choices but they also have an innate urge to make sense of their choices. Sometimes they believe in the meaning of life through the existence of a Creator, but forgets about the irrationality and discomfort of life. “A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity” (Camus). An absurd man is someone who would accept all the meaninglessness and lives in a complete awareness of the opposition of his mind. In addition, he opposes rationalism because humans cannot be convinced that the universe has a coherent order and because a complete grasp of this order is beyond our capacity as humans. He does not claim that rationalism is bad; rather, states that he wishes to live without it. One thing that he was sure about was that humans must accept the absurd for the vast experience that life offers to us. Here he again brings a binary opposition of acceptance and denial which means either believing in the absurd for the sake of believing or choosing to end the course of life. To find a middle path between the binaries or a state of transcendence is what he called “philosophical suicide”, a philosophy that is followed by existentialists mostly. “For Camus therefore, since absurd has no meaning, man must hold himself apart from it and revolt against it. This is why he suggested philosophical suicide as a solution to reverse the absurdity of life” (Ambrose Tochukwu Arinze). There is no escape from the happenings of life, thus no escape from absurdities of life. “Humans must come to terms with the Absurd and strive to make the most out of it by just living; without expecting, predicting or demanding anything afterwards” (Karavournioti). That’s why Sisyphus is a perfect absurd man as he neither bowed down to the face of absurdity nor did he accept the callings of death. He was aware of his limitations, his abilities, and chose to believe in his own reality.

5. Research Gaps

Being a postmodern writer, Borges has been highly appreciated because of his riddles and confusion that are present in his writing. “The Library of Babel” is one of such essays that plays with the reader’s mind and makes them really work for the utter meaning. In fact, postmodern interpretation of his works is

highly popular and common in this field of study. The incorporation of several postmodern thinking at once on a particular essay is something that has not been studied prominently. That's why this study is being conducted to shed light on those previous gaps to bring something new in the field of knowledge.

6. Rationale of the Study

Although there are certain works available in this field of study, the paper is significant in terms of shedding light into the new arena of knowledge. This paper intends to enrich the world of postmodern perspective from the arena of literature, specially adding significant information derived from Baudrillard's notion of reality along with Albert Camus' take on the absurd. It hopes to provide new insights into the hyperreal state of a library where reality is compromised through several dimensions and opens a window towards a chain of symbols.

7. Research Questions

1. What are the postmodern notions of "The Library of Babel" which brings out different realities?
2. How have the contents of the library made a chain of ideologies that ultimately reject the original ones?
3. How do the non-existent signifiers or symbols affect the system of meaning?

8. Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is 'to analyze how the notions of simulacrum or hyperreality can be extracted from Borges' text making it carry a postmodern essence'. The specific objectives are-

1. To examine the postmodern notions of "The Library of Babel" to bring forth the realities in the system
2. To review the emergence of fractured ideologies that utterly reject the original ones
3. To investigate the creation of non-existent signifiers or symbol that generates a chain of meaning

9. Research Methodology

This short study has been conducted through qualitative methodology where all the necessary data and information have been collected mostly from secondary sources. While "The Library of Babel" of Jorge Luis Borges has been regarded as the primary text, assistance from several books and articles has been taken to conduct a postmodern analysis of the contents of the text and achieve the goals of this paper.

10. Discussion & Findings

10.1 Summary of the Story: Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel" (1941) compares human universe to a limitless library which is made up of hexagonal chambers, floating stairs, and lengthy corridors all filled with countless books. There are 25 symbols total in these books: 22 letters, a comma, a full stop, and a space. These 25 symbols can be used in any combination or permutation. Each book has exactly 410 pages, and they are all different from one another. The library was always in existence, according to Borges' narrator, fashioned in a way which only a higher creature could have orchestrated. The readers are desperate to devour the different languages, codes of every volume which sometimes felt to be indecipherable. Structurally the library is eternal, however its contents are limited. Borges painted such a picture that readers of the library and the story will constantly be in a dilemma of choices. The story concludes by stating that humanity suffers from realizing their choices and the end of

those choices. The concept of an infinite entity with infinite time travel disrupts the order of the library and reels the reader into hopelessness. Borges wondered about the innate human nature of making sense out of utter nonsenses. He mentions that many people have lost their minds trying to find purpose in them, and those who have not committed suicide out of desperation have pursued a variety of paths in their search for knowledge. Some have attempted to put together passages from various writings to produce cohesive texts, while others have chosen to burn books, which they deemed to be useless.

10.2 A Postmodern Picture: Borges' work functions as a connection between two literary periods supporting French philosopher Roland Barthes' statement that every piece of writing has a 'double postulation' meaning that vagueness is mandatory for any writing produced in the transition period of modernism to post modernism (Keiser). Postmodernism, which was developed in the latter decades of the 20th century, is a breath of hope in the depths of despair. It distinguishes itself from modernism in part because of its glorification of emptiness, sorrow, and paranoia. The irrationality of meaning in any postmodern book or experience can be attributed to this. There, rationality is rarely seen, and reality turns into a subjective perception, making people feel isolated. This acceptance adds layers to existence while also making reality complex as universal truths fade into obscurity. "The Library of Babel" would be a truly postmodern text since it illustrates everything that has been said before. Beginning with the introduction, we notice a feeling of uncertainty about life. With its hexagonal and constant galleries, the library, or "the universe", is in a complex state of structural design. The writer is unsure of the library's infinite state, but he is confident that it is "indefinite". This demonstrates that the library lacks all logic and reasoning. Then Borges discusses his personal experiences, demonstrating once more that the idea of an infinite library is only his own opinion. the existence of God is depicted by one "cyclical book" whose presence is also questionable. The description gets a bit scientific at this point when he reveals the way the books have been organized- "There are five shelves for each of the hexagon's walls; each shelf contains thirty- five books of uniform format; each book is of four hundred and ten pages; each page, of forty lines, each line, of some eighty letters which are black in color" (Borges). He adds that even in a de-systematized system, there were axioms which contradict the postmodern notion of declining universal truth, however the axioms are too sketchy to be considered as something to live by. The first axiom professes that the library is infinite whereas in the previous paragraph it has been said that the books are organized in a specific number. He calls men the 'imperfect librarian' as they are unable to decode the reason behind the library. We consider eternity to be perfect and totalized, then the previous statement falls apart and questions the presence of the library. Similarly, the second axiom is the most confusing statement of the entire text. Where in the epigraph it has been stated that the library has a variation of 23 letters, in the second axiom it becomes orthographical symbols of 25. This cannot be a mistake since the symbols have apparently constructed "a general theory" for the library. Then comes the instance of a complete book that could be deciphered into a new language. Everything seemed to be right at the place with every possible answer and the promise of "vindication". Vindication here is written with a 'capital V' which literary gives the word a personified explanation at the same time offers a god-like characteristic of it philosophically. This sense of completeness, however, did not last long when the concept itself turned out to be devoid of any meaning. The hexagons began to haunt the men who perceived them as well as their works which gave birth to 'purifiers' and 'acquisitors' who would form their own ideas to remain in a state of pseudo-completeness. From this line of thinking rose the superstition of the "Man of the Book" who had a perfect formula of living, but even that notion was useless to reach that perfect state of being. Afterwards it was believed that maybe the fault was in

language as language is repetitive and cyclical. Language when looked at closely, expresses those utterances are nothing but the repetition of and addition in the same utterance- “you who read me, you sure of understanding my language?” (Borges). This invokes a sense of restlessness and anxiety since language is an encompassing system. At the end of the essay, the library is written to be something that will surpass human existence, Borges believes, and that it is “unlimited and cyclical”. But the final footnote of the text contradicts this statement by introducing us to the only female character Letizia Alvarez de Toledo who perceives the idea of the library being useless and finds a finite explanation among the infinites. These final words prove “The Library of Babel” to be a truly postmodern text for its insufficient almost illogical anecdotes and subjective way of thinking.

10.3 Imploded Ideologies: When Baudrillard proposed his idea about ‘hyperreal’, he stated that it is a gradual process that makes something hyperreal. Hyperreal follows certain orders to become hyperreal-four orders to be specific. Borges’ library can also be thought of as a representation of a hyperreal symbol that reflects different ideologies. The presentation or the description of the library can be referred to the ‘sacramental order’ of Baudrillard where the sign is the trusted copy of the original. It is like the lifestyle vlog of present time; we know that these images of the videos are not occurring now, yet we perceive them as real vlogs because of its imitation to the real thing. To put it simply, it imitates the original image in a faithful way. In the introductory part of the essay, we observe a structural analysis of the library. The library sounds like a library, however statements like “infinite number of hexagonal galleries”, “the library is unending” etc. make us question about the actual existence of the library (Borges). To be able to question that, we must perceive the existence of that library and it is only possible if it has even the slightest connection to reality. Borges, as he liked to riddle with his readers, never disclosed the authenticity of the library. His working at a library in real life makes this description more plausible as an instance of the first order of simulacra. The second order or the “order of maleficence” unwraps the evil nature of the sign system and brings out the twisted ideologies of human mind. For example, in any cup-noodles there is a little packet of spices that contains tiny pieces of vegetables. It is well known to us that those vegetables are in no way the real ones but are created in the labs and preserved with toxins. Despite knowing that we consume those, then attend campaigns to promote consumption of healthy foods. Now that it has been said in the previous order that it is an imitation of the original sign, the library tries to fit in by messing with the previously established ideologies. The library poses itself as the perfect creation so much so that people start to believe that it “can only be the work of a god” (Borges). It distorts reality by revealing the book of Vindication which makes the librarians almost insane. Failure of finding the book makes many librarians kill themselves which only made the book more appealing for the next generation of librarians. In addition, it produces different groups of humans who had contradictory thoughts about the book thus infliction of ideological conflicts. Baudrillard characterizes the third order as the “order of sorcery” where the copy appears as a faithful one but not really an original version. If someone visits a movie shooting set, he/she will realize that the shooting scenes appear to be real but are not a real representation. Structurally the library imitates a normal library, however it is nothing but the copied image of one. We are accepting this as a library because of its imitation, not because of its description. And at the back of our minds, we know that it is in fact unreal because it has been described in a work of fiction. As we are reading about people roaming around the library, living, and dying inside the library, we are accepting the library to be an unreal copy of reality. At the final stage of “pure simulacra”, the representation is nowhere near the original one but an utter simulation of reality. It is neither inside nor outside of reality in the extent that

we become unsure of the reality itself. The description that had made the library a copy of the original is the same statement that can turn it into a simulated reality. Just like we see the ‘metaverse’ taking over our original universe, here ‘the library’ has extended itself into the realms of ‘the universe’ which makes us question reality itself. The library has molded itself into the universe at the same time amalgamated itself with the universe. It has swallowed human logic and capability to establish its existence over the humans, which is exactly what Baudrillard feared happening. He was concerned with humans being accustomed to the simulacrum because “The simulacrum is never what hides the truth-it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (Baudrillard).

10.4 Stumbling on Signs: Another postmodern notion of any text is that it shows an incoherence between signifiers and signified in a sign system. Bringing out a chain of signifiers, it proves that the world is an abundance of signifiers and scarcity of signified making the sign system incomplete. In “The Library of Babel”, we come across the description of a mirror which holds several interpretations. Philosophically, the mirror is considered a representation of imagination in the sense of consciousness. It has the capacity to replicate the reflections in its own fictitious reality. Mirrors are also linked to the imagery of water as it portrays reflection or physical self. Additionally, because thought is a mental tool that reflects the universe and enables self-awareness, several philosophers linked thought with mirrors. Another sign that plays a significant role in text is the sign of ‘a savior’. This savior often comes in the shape of books, man of the book or sometimes in the library itself. The librarians often feel desperate to be saved in the disguise of complete consciousness. This perfect and unchangeable savior is the epitome of existence and understanding, thus it is infinite. Whether we like numbers or absolutely hate them, there is a philosophical understanding of numbers. If numbers exist, they are typically classified as “abstract objects” by philosophers, and those who believe in their existence assert that they exist outside of space and time. This means that the library of Babel exists outside of human understanding. In Babel, the numbers signify the order at the same time represents the start and growth of the library in structured way along with its movement among the librarians. Postmodern language follows hints of poststructuralism which means that it is supposed to depict several meanings and it is not necessary to fixate a single meaning but accepting the chain of signifiers. This is what happens in Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* when Sisyphus was made to cross a mountain only to fall and do it all over again. The action of Sisyphus represents every human life where we go on a cyclical path without any purpose because of the frenzy of meaning. “The Library of Babel” is a metaphorical text of human understanding, reasoning, and logic. According to the postmodern belief, thoughts have several meanings because of the vagueness of language. Rather than viewing it as a problem, it should be accepted as reality itself has been a mystery.

11. Conclusion

“Affectively, literature is subjected to the scrutiny of the reader himself. This banks on the principle that capitalizes on the death of the author/writer once the work is published. Doors are given for introspection to understand the work better. The author is left with nothing but to acknowledge that she no longer holds the ultimate meaning of the work” (Magan). Words have a surprising ability to bind us and at the same time free us. They are thought of as the most powerful spirit as they can control the world. It is in our hands how we perceive and pursue them. Because words are cyclical in nature, it becomes impossible to decode them in human understanding. This lines with the postmodern understanding of reality that is not the usual reality at all. Several Borges ‘stories are variations on the

same theme or themes since he had a set of preoccupations that he followed in writing his fictions. His fictional tales incorporate a wide range of elements, including metafiction, fantasy, imagination, pseudo-universe, metaphysics, and riddles. It is on the readers how they want to interpret the narratives, they can either do it on a positive understanding or a negative one or on the one that amalgamates the previous two.

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