

ANALYZING NARRATIVES OF UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN VIKAS SWARUP'S *SIX SUSPECTS*

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When a writer decides to write a story, a narrator is needed to the story to the reader. A narrator is the most significant factor of fiction that talks much about the caliber of a writer. The choice of narrator or point of view is vital in displaying the perspective of the author to the readers. A writer may have a first-person or third-person point of view depending upon the need of the story. The point of view of the narrator decides much about how the readers will perceive the story. In the first-person point of view, the narrator is considered as a part and character of the story while in the third-person point of view the narrator may or may not be a character in the novel. Much depends on the role of the narrator as it is through the eyes of the narrator that the readers perceive the story. It is on the narrator that the readers rely most on upon. But what happens if the narrator turns untrustworthy? The paper will focus on the narratives of an unreliable narrator in the light of the novel *Six Suspects* written by Indian diplomat and established writer Vikas Swarup.

Wayne C. Booth, in his work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, has tried to define an unreliable narrator: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (158-59). In simple words, an unreliable narrator is one whose credibility is dubious. A mystery novel that is a subgenre of crime novel itself is like a crime puzzle that offers an opportunity to readers to solve the crime before a detective does. The readers rely on the clues provided by the narrator to solve the crime. Sometimes an author uses the tool of an unreliable narrator to trick the minds of the readers hence distracting them from solving the crime puzzle thus delaying the climax. The narrator uses fake hints to distract readers from solving the crime puzzle. Few crime novelists even find it interesting to shock the readers through the revelation of the narrator as the killer. Killer narrator fiction has emerged as a new trend in contemporary crime literature. In the present paper, I have attempted to investigate the narrative used in the *Six Suspects* further exploring the dimensions of the unreliable narrator in the given novel.

"Murder, like all art, generates interpretation and resists explanation" (*Six Suspects* 11). The above-mentioned intriguing tagline, written by Michelle de Krestler and extracted from *The Hamilton Case*, belongs to the first chapter of *Six Suspects*: the second book of celebrated Indian author and diplomat Vikas Swarup. *Six Suspects* is a celebrated crime novel distinguished for its remarkable polyphonic narrative. The novel has won critical acclaim and a secure place for Swarup in the literary canon. What is more interesting is the fascination of writers towards the killer narrator. Readers are made to find out the killer through the clues provided by the narrator. The narrator guides the readers throughout the crime puzzle but what if the narrator turns out to be the killer? There have been certain instances of crime novels with unreliable narrators since the emanation of crime fiction such as *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *The Soft Touch* by John D. MacDonald, *The Killer Inside Me* by Jim Thompson, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie, *Double Indemnity* by James M. Cain, etc. The killer narrator would try to justify murder at the end presenting his/her reasons to do it.

Vikas Swarup; a celebrated diplomat and ex-spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs, has proved his caliber as a novelist. Born in Allahabad, Swarup belonged to a family of lawyers and having graduated joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1986. His debut novel *Q&A* has been translated into forty-two languages and has cinematically been adopted as *Slumdog Millionaire*. Swarup is considered one of the best crime and thriller writers in recent times. His second novel *Six Suspects* is not merely a suspense thriller but a commentary on corruption in bureaucracy, the judiciary, and in every walk of life. With an unconventional way of storytelling, Swarup has tried to touch on all possible aspects of militancy, racism, and call centres. In the present study, I have attempted to investigate how the

author has used an unreliable narrator to shock the readers using the device of ‘red herrings’ and to explore the kind of narratives used to depict the crime story.

The narrative scheme of a crime novel decides the components of suspense and thrill in a crime tale. When it comes to crime fiction, much depends on the narrative and narrator. The novelist may use various techniques to surprise and thrill the readers. Using an unreliable narrator is one such technique to intensify the element of surprise in the novel. Nunning tries to explain the term ‘unreliable’ concerning narration believing that it can be explained: “in the context of frame theory as a projection by the reader who tries to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator’s unreliability” (*jstor.org*). The novelist has used different narrative voices to describe the story of all the characters in *Six Suspects*.

“Not all deaths are equal. There’s a caste system even in murder...That is why the murder of Vivek ‘Vicky’ Rai’ the thirty-two-year-old owner of the Rai Group of industries and son of the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, has been dominating the news for the past two days” (*Six Suspects* 13). The above-mentioned opening lines of *Six Suspects* affirm that the novel is not merely a crime tale, but a social documentary as well. The novel seems to have been inspired by the real-life incident of Jessica Lal’s murder case. Jessica Lal; a celebrity model and a part-time bartender girl, loses her life after being shot by Manu Sharma (son of a politician) after she refuses to offer him. *Six Suspects* discusses the story of Ruby Gill; a bartender girl and a Ph.D. scholar, who is shot to death by Vicky Rai after she refused him a drink. Vicky Rai is accused of the murder of Ruby Gill but soon gets acquitted by the court and throws a grand party to celebrate his acquittal but gets murdered in his party. Police take into custody six gun-yielding suspects. The story is narrated by different characters through polyphonic narratives. Arun Advani, an investigating journalist, is the first character in the novel who introduces all the six suspects to the readers through his press columns. The six suspects include bureaucrat Mohan Kumar, actress Shabnam Saxena, tribal Eketi, thief Munna, politician Jagannath Rai and an American named Larry Page. The novelist has divided his work into six units where every unit carries different chapters of the same nature.

The character of Bollywood actress Shabnam Saxena has been introduced in the first-person narrative through her diary entry through which she details her tale while the first-person narrator has been used to describe the character of Larry Page and Munna. The corrupt bureaucrat Mohan Kumar and the innocent tribal Eketi are introduced through a third-person narrative. The investigating journalist Arun Advani recounts all other required details through his press reports and articles.

The novelist has bifurcated the novel into six units namely ‘Murder’, ‘Suspects’, ‘Motives’, ‘Evidence’, ‘Solution’, and ‘Confession’. Every unit has further been sundered into aptly titled chapters. The novel comprises twenty-seven chapters. Its central plot is based on the mystery of the murder of Vicky Rai; the young proprietor of Rai Group of Industries and notorious son of the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, who ironically gets murdered at his acquittal party. *Six Suspects* ridicules the unscrupulous judiciary system and unveils the loopholes of the system. The novel appears to have been inspired by the real-life murder of Jessica Lal by Manu Sharma. The way Manu Sharma exploits the position and power of his politician father and copes to avert punishment provokes Swarup to pen down this fiction. Swarup has used atypically refreshing narrative techniques to recount the story. The role of the relater has not been played by a lone character, but multiple characters have accomplished this responsibility. Arun Advani probes deeper into the lives of all the six suspects who have been discovered possessing a gun on the spot of the murder of Vicky Rai.

Six Suspects opens with the details of felonies committed by Vicky Rai who always manages to escape from the law through the connections of his politician father; the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh named Jagannath Rai. The list of crimes of Vicky Rai is quite long: mowed down six people under his car to death as a teenager; killed two black bucks and “...it was surely only a matter a time before he graduated to open murder” (15). The only punishment Vicky Rai suffers (fourteen days in prison) is due to the charge of killing blackbucks because the only eyewitness; Kishore Rajput, refuses to change his statement. Vicky mocks the hypocrisy of the judiciary system asserting “...that a country that could not protect brides from being burnt for dowry and young girls from being picked up for prostitution should prosecute people for killing deer” (15).

Swarup has used exceptional art of characterization to delve into the lives of six suspects and the state of affairs that hauls them to the murder spot. The novelist has used the first unit titled ‘Murder’ to discuss the incident of the murder of notorious Vicky Rai. The second unit named ‘Suspects’ narrates the life, struggle, and story of every suspect. The third unit titled ‘Motives’ depicts the intention of all the suspects to kill Vicky Rai. This unit deeply explores the life of all the suspects to find out their purpose behind carrying a gun at the acquittal party of Vicky Rai. ‘Evidence’; the

fourth unit deals with the shreds of evidence found by police against every suspect. The sixth unit titled ‘Solution’ delineates the discoveries and reports of Arun Advani who records the procedure of investigation and happenings of the case of the murder of Vicky Rai. In this unit, the author has used an outstandingly innovative narrative style to recount how all suspects find themselves in a situation that leads them to be considered to be suspects of the murder. ‘Confession’; the last unit comes as a shock to the readers in which the real murderer confesses the guilt before the readers. It discloses the identity of the real culprit Arun Advani; the journalist, who has been inquiring into the case of the murder of Vicky Rai. It is the climax of the fiction that makes it a rollicking good read. Most of the occurrences are exhibited through columns of ‘The Bare Truth’ published in the newspaper in which Advani informs the readers about the proceedings of the police investigation of Vicky Rai’s murder case. The conversations between news anchor Barkha Dutt and the news reporter on the news channel ‘Breaking News’ reveal other details about all six suspects. Being an investigating journalist, Arun Advani attempts to probe the murder case of Ruby Gill. After Vicky Rai gets murdered, Advani recalls being interviewed by Barkha Das in her TV show, “You devoted much of your career to exposing the misdeeds of Vicky Rai and castigating him in your column. What do you plan to do now that he is dead?” (18) to which Advani replies, “Find his killer...because my crusade was never against Vicky Rai. It was against the system which permits the rich and powerful to believe that they are above the law. Vicky Rai was only a visible symptom of the malaise that has infected our society” (18-19).

Advani has been illegally recording conversations on Vicky Rai’s personal phone for two years which lead him to decide to bring justice to Ruby Gill and all those wronged by Vicky Rai. While confessing the murder of Vicky Rai to his readers, Advani narrates the saga of becoming a witness to-

...the favours being exchanged, the bribes being paid, the frauds being perpetrated, the girls being seduced. I heard ear-numbing accounts of how laws were broken and subverted, how justice was trampled upon, raped, pillaged, and sold to the highest bidder. Every infraction was like a band of iron squeezing my heart. Every injustice was like a nail being driven into my body. (*Six Suspects* 552)

The novel falls in the category of typical detective fiction but also has dimensions of a suspense thriller and mystery fiction. The novelist has experimented with a narrative scheme ignoring the typical narrative of the crime genre. *Six Suspects* is not merely a crime fiction but also serves as a social commentary on corruption among various walks of contemporary Indian society. The novel even raises the question if the murder of a criminal is justified. Is the murderer of a criminal a crime? Does transgressing law in name of justice, is justice?

Swarup has tried to liberate *Six Suspects* from the moral obligation of the author. The novel is not merely a crime puzzle but serves the purpose of a social documentary as well. John Cawelti points out the major characters in crime fiction- “The classical detective story requires four main roles: (a) the victim; (b) the criminal; (c) the detective; and (d) those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it” (Cawelti 91). *Six Suspects* offers a dilemmic perspective on the moral spectrum. It has raised certain burning questions like “Is it justified murdering a criminal?”. Vicky Rai

Swarup, in an interview, suggests his reason for choosing polyphonic narratives in his consecutively second successful novel *Six Suspects*, “I had to experiment with voice, with technique and at the same time ensure that my story remained coherent within the confines of the schematic space signposted by the section headings—Murder, Suspects, Motives, Evidence . . .” (Plessner). The novelist further throws light on the purpose and process of creating characters of all six suspects. Swarup argues, “I was trying to give the readers a glimpse of modern India through six different eyes” (Plessner).

Swarup has used the literary device of ‘red herring’ to distract the readers and hence delaying the climax. The novelist’s use of six suspects as six red herrings to put off the readers from the real clues has left the readers oblivious and dumbstruck. It is at the very end that the real culprit confesses his guilt and justifies his actions. The technique of ‘red herring’ (literarydevices.net) has indeed added curiosity to the fiction and has adorned the narrative scheme. The concept of red herring has copiously been used in the crime genre and is needed to be avoided to assert fair play (tvtropes.org) in crime fiction. When it comes to defining red herring in literature-

Red Herring is a kind of fallacy that is an irrelevant topic introduced in an argument to divert the attention of the listeners or readers from the original issue. In literature, this fallacy is often used in detective or suspense novels to mislead readers or to induce them to make false conclusions. (literarydevices.net)

The *New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines 'red herring' as "an unimportant fact, idea, event, etc. that takes people's attention away from the important ones" (1267). The dictionary tracks down the genesis of 'red herring' as "from the custom of using the smell of smoked, dried herring (which was red) to train dogs to hunt" (1267). The conception of red herring as a diversion was first argued by an English polemicist named William Cobbett who details the use of red herring by the press to distract the readers. Emily Petsko, a literary critic, mentions the use of red herring by Cobbett, "He used the story as a metaphor to decry the press, which had allowed itself to be misled by false information about a supposed defeat of Napoleon" (Petsko). Michael Quinion, writer, bibliophile, and webmaster of World-Wide Words, mentions the use of the mask of red herrings saying- "This (red herring) caused them to take their attention off important domestic matters" (Petsko). The notion of red herring is no more limited to literature but is also used to refer to various diversions used by news channels and media houses under the impact of the governing party to distract the people's attention to trivial affairs concealing the inability of administration.

The literary technique of red herring to distract the readers has been used for a long time in literature. It has hitherto been used by various crime litterateurs for decades. Agatha Christie popularised the technique of red herring in literature. In her work *And Then There Were None* the presence of red herrings is evident. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is an apt example of the device of red herring to distract and perplex the readers. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket shows the writer's fascination with the literary device of red herrings. Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* and *The Final Problem* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are perfect examples of the use of red herrings by crime writers. It appears that writers derive pleasure in distracting and misguiding the readers. Red herring is an explored concept among contemporary crime writers as well all over the world. A few examples are; *An Unwanted Guest* by Shari Lapena, *The Witch Elm* by Tana French, *M. King's Bodyguard* by Nial Leonard, *The Cutting Season* by Attica Locke, *Watch Girls* by Jennifer Wolfe, *Your House Will Pay* by Steph Cha, *The Chalk Man* by C. J. Tudor, *My Sister*, *The Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite, *The Chain* by Adrian McKinty and many more.

To conclude, it can be asserted that *Six Suspects* is a perfect example where Swarup has perfectly used the technique of six red herrings to distract the readers by using an unreliable narrator to create an intriguing narrative. Swarup has used innovative polyphonic narratives to maintain coherence in writing. Swarup has successfully used crime fiction as a weapon to bring social change into the society

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