
‘Some writers do set out to be experimental for a variety of reasons’ (193), and Julie Armstrong’s *Experimental Fiction* is one such experiment in writing with a very clear and straightforward reason. Meant for creative writers who want to experiment in writing and for readers of such experimental works, Armstrong leads by example, so far as the writing style is concerned. The book, divided into four sections (plus introduction and conclusion), does not have the traditional division into chapters, and begins with a detailed and unusual contents section. An important and interesting aspect of the book is the activity box that follows each description of new writing. Through these activity/experiment boxes, the book attempts to engage with readers, some of whom are also supposed to be aspiring writers and who would want to learn from the past experiments and consequent developments in literature.

*Experimental Fiction* introduces the readers and the writers alike to the idea of how experiment began in literature, became prevalent and is almost inevitable in the current scenario. It builds up on the processes by which this experimentation has been sustained and strengthened from the twentieth century into the twenty-first century. Armstrong traces the philosophical, psychological and technological changes that led writers to depart from the realism of nineteenth century and to try to find and, if necessary, invent new ways of express themselves. Armstrong touches upon various historical, social, cultural and political conditions to explore the new ways of and new form of writing that emerged in the twentieth century. The four sections of the book successively deal with Modern(ism), the Beats, Postmodernism and the contemporary era in writing. Armstrong juxtaposes their similarities and differences, using examples from representative authors and their texts.

Linearity of time and hence linearity of narration is the first casualty in this quest to experiment and form anew. Space is the next. Armstrong discusses in some detail the blurring the boundaries of time and space and their ultimate apparent dissolution in stream of consciousness technique in the writings of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and so on. She also discusses reality (psychological rather than physical), (lack of) meaning, (un)truth, multiplicity of meanings and truths, and so on, to portray ‘contradiction, angst, rootlessness, disorientation, urban dislocation and, yet, optimism, making the world new’ (15). Making new is the clarion call of experimental writers, and the book seems designed to invite readers to be actively involved while reading and responding to such literature. In this context, fragmentation and fluidity of form reflect the fragmentation and fluidity of thought, perception, experiences, identities, and human character. Form, content, language, syntax, and technique – all expose the complexity and chaos of the modern and postmodern, and the contemporary world.

Armstrong succinctly brings out how Beats responded to heightened awareness of altered perceptions about ideas regarding racial and gender (in)equality through interactions with people on the margins, drugs, experimenting with sexual practices, and turning to spiritual transcendence and music. Williams uses narratives by Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and others to illustrate what the Beats were influenced by and how they wrote.

According to Armstrong, postmodern has an inherent sense of playfulness, experimenting with a representation of identity that is in flux, and it ‘seeks to challenge beliefs and to stimulate new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing and new ways of being in the world’ (111, 112). The women’s movement, gay writing, identity and subversion are some of the key elements of this writing, which serve to uncover the commercialisation that is the driving force of the postmodern world. Metafiction...
emerges from this flux that postmodern writing has become. Explanations from the fictional narratives of authors like Brett Easton Ellis, Douglas Coupland, Jeanette Winterson, Don DeLillo, Kurt Vonnegut, Salman Rushdie and so on, help chart the era from postmodernism through postcolonialism to the new era.

The section on the new era makes for the most enthralling read. This last section is perhaps the most important one in the quest to know and understand experimental fiction, but its appears rushed. It explores the melting and yet ever presenting boundaries of ‘art, reality, social networking, celebrity, advertising, marketing and publicity’ (175) that are reflected in the fiction of this new era. Armstrong could have emphasised and discussed this section more. Although historical reasons are important to understand the current experimentation in writing, the focus on such writing would have more fully served the purpose of the book, of introducing the readers and writers to experimental fiction.

Another major drawback of this experiment in writing that is Armstrong’s book is that many times it reads like class notes, albeit polished class notes. There is some repetition while discussing historical changes in writing styles, form and techniques, which for the readers reinforces the impression of reading modified and refined notes that were perhaps meant for a class. It introduces the readers to contemporary experiments in literature, an area which could have been explored and explained further instead of the greater focus that is given to historical experiments with writing, with making new. This making new in the twenty-first century would have made for a far interesting read.

The book concludes with an optimistic section ‘A New Era is Dawning’, which hails the birth of a new reader along with a reaffirmation of the death of the author. Armstrong closes by saying that experimental ‘writing should make readers think, question, challenge assumptions, unsettle, re-define, grow and not stay stuck in the past … with no surprises, no shocks, no new adventures’ (195, 196). A gripping book made more fascinating because of its own writing style as well as its introduction to various new ways/styles/forms of writing/creating towards the end of the book (anti-novel, extreme metafiction, electronic fiction, etc), Experimental Fiction is a welcome addition to the library of both creative writers and readers, who themselves want to experiment with different writing styles as well as read and respond to these new writing styles. That said, it could have itself surprised and shocked more.

Suman Sigroha