

USING COLLAGE FOR CREATIVE WRITING

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Introduction

Often associated with fine art practice, particularly postmodernists' technique, the lexicon collage has its root in the French word *coller*, which means to paste or to glue. And, this etymological meaning is still at the core of many existing definitions of the term. It is defined as "a pictorial technique that uses photographs, news cuttings, and all kinds of objects" (Osborne 1970:251), or as a subcategory of assemblage (Seitz 1961). This technique, in its construction/production level, operates with two typical operations – segmentation and composition. Of the two, the first is wrenching fragments from various sources; and the second is putting the fragments in a particular space. When finished, collage art appears to be something like a juxtaposition of prefabricated elements into a visual entity.

Collage, the technique of combining various materials in a single entity, is not new; it was practiced even at critical conditions. Hindu god Ganesh, for instance, could be kept alive when his truncated head was replaced by a baby elephant's head; Dakshya Prajapati got his life back after his mutilated head was replaced by he-goat's head. Needless to say, collage as a technique distinguished from these instances is a twentieth century development (Seitz 1961). Pablo Picasso is credited for making this technique popular. Later, the technique proliferated so much that it imparted great influence in many other art domains (Fox 1946: 234).

Photography is one of such art form where collage has been experimented. David Hockney's photomontage – *My Mother, Bradford, Yorkshire* (1982) – is one of the examples of collage in recent art form. Given the popularity of this photography, it can easily be understood that the technique that was primarily used in painting has been accepted in other forms of art as well.

The use of collage in writing shares a number of traits with other notions like pastiche, intertextuality, simulation and hypertextuality. It may be emphasized that the fundamental operations in these techniques – cut and paste – are used in collage art, too. Nonetheless, collage in contrast to these techniques differs in some respects. Major point of departure is the use of yet another technique to which I have used the term 'suture': this activity uses the space that lies between the pasted materials/objects, and provides space for utilizing emotion/intellect of the writer.

Sources for Segmentation

Collage technique imposes no boundary for writers in their freedom to select materials to segmentation from – writers are free to choose. Possible sources of the content to segment from can be anything ranging from fantasy to social reality, oral form of literature to written texts, and subjective experience to objective reality. It, however, does not mean that the process can be carried out anarchically. At least two constraints confine writers in their selection of specific sources: first, the interest of the writers; and the second, the availability of materials (Acharya 2007).

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Oral literature, which is viewed as literature of a pre-literate culture, exists in many forms: epics, ballads, folk narrative (legends, myths and folktales), rituals (chants), proverbs, jokes and sayings. Understandably, they are easily accessible. With effort of the writers like Edward Burnes Tayler, James Frazer, Grimm brothers, Franz Boas and others, a huge section of oral literature has been put to print. Collagists, thus, have a large corpus in their disposal.

In addition to oral literature transformed into written texts, there is abundance of other materials. With the dawn of renaissance and invention of printing press in the fifteenth century that made proliferation of publication possible, activities in almost all the domains of human interest have been recorded in texts. Consequently, the archive of usable texts for any writer now is unimaginably rich. Moreover, they are easily accessible due to their availability through the medium like internet. Leak's remark, "[classical literature] remained, and it remains, the dominant mode of literary expression" (1993:8), is worthy to recall here.

Along with these sources, another repertoire can be writer's situatedness (Said 1992:1212). The significance of writer's situatedness, as Edward Said has postulated, resides in collage writing's assumption: geographic location has serious repercussion in intellectual production. The materials that writers can draw from their situatedness need not necessarily be in Platonic sense of imitation: their situatedness can take any of the forms like Aristotelian understanding of improvisation, or any other form.

Treatment to Segmented Material

Once the sources for writing are segmented, they may be given any form of treatment like

parody, pastiche, allusion, transposition, travesty, caricature and forgery. These techniques, according to postmodern critics, have subtle differences (See, Juvan 2008). The difference, however, is not the focus of this study; hence, I discuss below only three techniques that can popularly be used.

Allusion, a reference to a person, place, or events, is a notable instance of shared language between two works. That said, it should not be understood that allusion is a mere quotation or citation: allusion in collaged text need neither to repeat word-for-word nor to attribute to the source.

Another proposed treatment to the wrenched material is parody. It is commonly agreed that the technique started with Hageon of Thason (sometime between the eighth and fourth century B. C). Parody may be viewed, according to Linda Hutcheon, "as a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" (2000:IX). Historically, Russian Formalists are credited for reviving parody. Earlier, the technique was believed to have been sidelined due to post-Enlightenment emphasis on genius. Regarding the source material to parody, it can be any content ranging from brief syntactical structure to an epic like discourse. Victor Hugo's statement *Veni, vidi, Vixi* (I came, I saw, I lived) can be understood as an instance of parody to Caesar's heroic maxim, *Veni, Vidi, Vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered).

The third treatment, which is possible to the wrenched material, is pastiche. According to Fredric Jameson, it is "like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in dead language; but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry" (1991:65). Writing created through this technique borrows ostentatiously from the

archive of existing materials; these materials may be used at various levels – quick passing allusions to using one book as a necessary base to another. An example of the latter type can be Amy Lowell’s *A Critical Fable*: it uses James Russell Lowell’s *A Fable for Critics*.

Collage in Use

Though there are writings of different genre that have employed collage, I discuss, though cursorily, how collage is used in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*.

Shaw’s play dramatizes the story of Henry Higgins who accepts a challenge from his friend Colonel Pickering to transform Eliza Doolittle into a well-spoken duchess. Higgins executes the task; but, following the accomplishment, he intends to abandon her. Eliza gets infuriated and abandons Higgins. As summarized by a scholar, the play is “a story of an artist who turns a live girl into a work of art, and then by a considerable effort of self-control restrains from falling in love with her” (MacCarthy 1951:108).

The play derives various materials from a number of sources and employs required techniques. A primary source, it seems, is Tobias Smollett’s *The Adventure of Peregrine Pickle* derived from Ovid’s Pygmalion-Galatea myth – it is used as canvas for other materials to paste. Over this story, he has inserted pieces from Henrik Ibsen’s plays *A Doll’s House* and *When We Dead Awaken*, and socio-linguistic reality of the time.

The plot of *Pygmalion* is a pastiche from Tobias Smollett’s (1895) *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (chapter 87). In this story, Peregrine meets a poverty stricken teen aged girl, pays money to her mother, takes her to his home, and trains her to speak and behave like a lady of dignity. Ultimately, he succeeds

in his mission. Finally, he witnesses her run away with his valet. Like Peregrine, Higgins meets Eliza, a “creature with her kerbstone English” and claims that he can “pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador’s garden party” (Shaw 1991:16). After betting with his friend Pickering, he succeeds in passing her off as the most graceful lady of London. Finally, like Peregrine, Eliza runs away.

We can find instances of treatment to segmented content in the presentation of characters. Some characters are drawn from real people of Shaw’s time; and others from Ovid’s narrative poem, *Metamorphosis*. For instance, Eliza is a collage of Galatea in the poem and Nora of *A Doll’s House*. Two traits of Eliza – one prior to her success and another post to her success – remind us of both the characters in the mythical narrative and the drama. Eliza’s one self, like Galatea’s, is a passive recipient to an expert’s toil. Another self that gets revealed after her success at the party is totally different from Galatea’s. Here, Eliza is as violent as Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Another character Higgins, is like the sculptor in Ovid’s poem; he is a passionate artist when he is “interested in people’s accent” (Shaw 1991:32). Similarly, Alfred Doolittle is a derived piece. The potential source for this character, as Henderson states, is Lickcheese: “Alfred Doolittle, Eliza’s father, belongs to the genius that Shaw created as far back as the early 1890s with Lickcheese in *Widower’s Houses*” (Henderson 1956:133).

Parody has been used, in a number of instances, to treat the segmented materials before they are arranged in the canvas of the play. An instance of parody’s use can be found in *Pygmalion*. Shaw has adopted and subverted the wrenched materials. An instance of this can be seen in the dialogue of Higgins (HG) and Pickering (PG).

HG: Eliza, Elizabeth, Besty and Bess,
They went to the woods to get a bird's nest.
PG: They found a nest with four eggs in it.
HG: They took one a piece, and left three in it.

This dialogue between Higgins and Pickering is a parody of a nursery rhyme, which reads:

Georgie Porgie, pudding and pie
Kissed the girls and made them cry
When the boys came out to play
Georgie Porgie ran away. (Opie 1951:158)

Conclusion

While the paper argues for the use of collage technique in writing, there is no wish to suggest that collage is the only way to produce creative writing. The intention is to argue that collage is one possible, and probably the easiest, if not a powerful, way to write. This form of writing can be created through three basic principles of art construction: segmentation, composition and suture. Of them, the first two are very easy to execute as they do not demand for great craft; the third is easy as well as complex. It is easy in the sense it provides space to express emotion/intellect of the writer, and difficult in the sense it demands for more craft if the writer wants to give writing a coherent look.

A very good instance of coherent collage in creative writing is Shaw's *Pygmalion*: it demonstrates how various materials can be segmented and treated before they are pasted in a canvas. Shaw, possibly, took one 'grand narrative' – Ovid's narrative poem or may be Smollett's version of Ovid's poem – as a canvas and inserted fragments from various sources, the play looks like modern art. Supposedly, if the author was creating postmodern text, he would use 'local narratives', and paste them together.

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