

Jon Fosse's *Septology*: A Reader's Perspective

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Winner of Nobel Prize in literature in the year 2023, Jon Fosse is a Norwegian author, translator, and playwright. His *Septology* (seven volume novel) is considered as his magnum opus. Fosse started writing this series in 2012 and published the seven volume series in three books. *The Other Name*, published in 2019, is the first book of this series which includes first two part of the septology. The second book- *I is Another*- was published in 2020 and contains subsequent three parts. The last book *A New Name*, published in 2021 contains the remaining two parts of the septology. Originally written in Norwegian language named Nynorsk, the septology came to the immediate attention of the world wide readers through the English translation of Damion Searls.

The novel is known for its lack of sentence break. It feels like reading one enormous incomplete sentence of 832 pages, without even full stop or any other punctuation marks at the end to convey a sense of meaningful completion of the sentence. The action of the novel takes place in seven days during Advent shortly before Christmas. The action of the first volume covers three days, the second volume spans two days and the last volume discusses two days up to Christmas morning. The main character and first-person narrator of *Septology*, Asle, is a painter and a widower who lives lonely in the house in Dylgja. He lives a solitary life only occasionally meeting Asleik—an old-fashioned country fisherman—and his gallerist Beyer, who lives in the city of Bjørgvin and a painter with same name. The namesake who lives in Bjørgvin can be treated as a doppelganger-- two versions of the same person, the same life. His namesake is living a life which the narrator would have lived probably if he had not changed his life style after meeting his wife Ales.

The narrator Asle informs the readers through his memory lane that he was living a reckless and bohemian life because of his emotionally detached family environment, his love for paintings

and his habit of excessive drinking in his prime of his youth. When he met Ales, he felt he found an anchor to emotionally attach himself. However, the peace and stability of his life is short lived as Ales died soon. He felt terribly lonely again and spent most of his time in painting. He painted those moments from his memory lane which gets frozen in his mind. He paints because he wants to delete those moments coming to his mind repeatedly. Painting for him is a way to forget his past. He earned his livelihood by painting that memory away from his mind and selling them in the Beyer's gallery in Bjørgvin. Substantial portion of his memory focuses on the other Asle, his namesake painter, whom he met during his study in the Arts College. He was fascinated by his namesake's merit in painting and was awed by his reckless life. His namesake married and had a family, but none of them stays with him as he grew fond of another women. Everyone deserted him at the end and he too lives lonely in his house in a very bad physical condition. The narrator Asle often meets him during his visit to Bjørgvin. Once he found him lying unconscious on a snow covered road near his home. Asle helped him to bring into a hospital where he died after a few days. Another strong current from his memory lane is his encounter with a woman named Guro, who appears off and on in his mind and he finds it difficult to know what exactly his relationship with that woman is. Though, faithful to his wife even after her death, the name Guro evoke a hidden relationship. The novel ends with Asle sitting and praying in his iconic place near the window of his room through which he can see the waves of the ocean.

The septology brought a new tradition to the writing of novel. Though similar in certain context with James Joyce's novels, this septology is distinguished from the earlier one due to its unique slow prose style and its ability to comment on life behind and beyond the hustle and bustle of daily activity. It brings a refined form of stream of consciousness technique and engages it to the postmodernist enquiry of transcendental signified in a way hitherto not used by any writer of this movement. In him we find life meets with literature and philosophy in an inseparable way. He brought a new trend of writing which cannot be limited to any literary 'ism'. The optimism of Victorianism, moral and spiritual degradation of modernism, hopelessness and futility of postmodernism are too limited to confine his literary works within it. He gives voice to what is 'unsayable'.

What strikes a reader when he/she reads the novel is its dream like narrative structure? The novel talks about Asle and what he thinks. On the one hand, it seems, the whole novel is actually what

goes inside the mind of main character Asle. The repetitive use of “I think”, “Asle thinks” from the first to the last of the novel testifies the fact that the events are recollected from the memory. At the same, on another level, it may also mean that none of the action narrated in the novel had actually happened. It is just what he thinks –kind of day dreaming or figment of imagination. This duality in the tone whether the action is recollected from memory lane or from his imagination offers the novel a dream-like structure. Action of each of the seven days begins with Asle reflecting on his incomplete picture where two diagonal strokes cross each other—one purple and the other brown, which Asleik named as St. Andrew’s Cross, and ends with a prayer-holding a “brown wooden cross” between thumb and finger, reciting a prayer, breathing in and out, asking for mercy. Sometimes he prayed ‘salve regina’, sometimes he prayed ‘pater noster’ or ‘Ave Maria’. Every day he is awed by his own creation-the incomplete St. Andrew’s cross. He felt a presence in that cross. He spends hours sitting in front of it and thinking as if it hides some message which can offer peace and solace to his troubled heart. However, the peace and instability of his heart lingers and he is unable to find an anchor to his troubled emotions. His enquiry into his misfortune, led him to discover that his restlessness is not caused by failure to fulfill materialistic ambition or earthly desires. It comes from a deeper understanding of loneliness and absurdity of his life. His helplessness became acute because he can not exactly share his pain with other.

Earlier, he believed that the picture is incomplete and requires more strokes from the brush; but the shining that comes from that picture in the darkness fascinates him towards this painting and therefore, at the end of the novels he kept this painting as a finished one without adding anything to it.

Suitable to this narrative structure, Fosse used a unique narrative style in septology. If the sequence of events taken together and re-organised, the story could have been told in just one volume. What makes the novel lengthy is his style of narration, popularly known as slow prose. He keeps on using repetition, focuses on minute details, not necessarily useful to the plot and tells a very small portion of the plot in a lengthy passage. He allows his story to progress very slowly. However, such technique never made the reader lost interest in the story line or digresses. Readers will begin to find meaning in apparently trivial action, though initially their focus is to catch a dominant story line. By degrees, they will forget that novel has any strong

plot, and will begin to discover something in those unnecessary repetitive details. Fosse deliberately reduces such action to almost inaction, and continues repetition of irrelevant details throughout the novel. A reader going through such actions pages after pages can relate his situation in a different light. The lengthy repetitions of actions comprised of inactions begin to work as an incantation and casts its spell on the readers. Under this spell, the reader can re-align his journey of life in a new lane of existential realization. In that situation, all people would feel like Vladimir and Estragon. Jon Fosse wants to show to the reader how does this process work and wants to strip down this layers to the bare minimum activity so that reader will discover for themselves what life is like when one 'do nothing'. A void or nihilism, a sense of loneliness and utter helplessness will appear to each individual. Asle lives his life with such realization and submit himself to the God as if, that is the only way to escape from this horrible situation.

The story transforms itself from Asle-Ales story to a story of every one because the story of Asle is related to each person at a much deeper level. A closer look into the spaces of every individual covered with silences and emptiness will take one to such deeper understanding. Asle's life will teach the readers that he is alone and helpless. His life lacks warmth and hopes. It feels as if he is waiting for the inevitable though he is a successful and well known painter in his society. The effect of his dream-like narrative technique, slow prose and the note of pessimism that runs throughout the novel transforms Asle's story into everyone's story. It echoes Beckett's conviction in his search for meaning of life. May be because of this similarity, a France journal *Le Monde* described him as the 21st century Beckett. Certainly such comparison is compatible, like Samuel Beckett, Fosse too make existential crisis as the theme of his works. The tone that life is meaningful due to veil of illusion else life is full of absurdity enters into Fosse's work in a subtle way. However, the final tone of a fruitless and endless waiting is saved by a belief in the humble submission in God. This later aspect distinguished his work from Samuel Beckett.

What does septology, then, want to convey is that it is an invitation to the 21st century reader to have some time for themselves to introspect or to spend some moment where they can find themselves closer to their selves. It is an appeal to face the cultural fear that affects everyone, as there is a fear in every mind that if we are 'to do nothing' we will be closer to our selves where certain existential questions will be inevitable to all of us in that situation. Engagement with such questions will enable readers to think about the essence of life, the real human condition.

Fosse wants to show to the readers that choices of a person makes his identity in this world though choices of an individual are often affected by the desire to gain name, fame, position power etc. Moreover, a person becomes the prisoner of these choices so much so that he thinks that identity can be established in the society based on his ability to make right choices. Since choices are made to gain name and fame, is there another identity to our life beyond this material possession. What, if a person does not make any choices? What, if he lost interest in material possession? In that case, where does his identity lie? How would one define who he is? Fosse's septology answer such questions in very subtle way that if any one dares to shed the narrative nets around him, he is bound to realize a hopeless condition. Therefore, Asle who is a successful person in the eyes of the world finds his life isolated and detached.

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