

Representation of History in Postmodern Fiction

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Abstract

This paper shows that history is portrayed as a fiction in postmodern fiction. As postmodern fiction is an art form, it narrates history in the form of a story. So, the postmodern fiction becomes the fusion of history and fiction. In other words, it is structured as rewriting of history challenging the traditional history. It deconstructs the traditional history of fictionalizing history. The narrative becomes more important than the facts and information. Since the postmodern era is the era of questioning reality, truth, facts and so on which were judged objectively, the history is written and studied subjectively instead of objectively. Regarding objectives of the research, the major objective of the research is to explore how postmodernists fictionalize history. Likewise, its objective are to discover self-reflexivity, multiple identities and metanarrative strategy in postmodern fictions.

The research analyses that traditional concept of history, which focuses on the chronological order of organizing events in writing history or historical fictions, has changed. The history is represented in a fragmentary form without having linear plot but focusing on multiple identity issues which traditional fictions failed to do, which also indicates that the great narratives of emancipation and a linear, progressive history have ended. The research adopts qualitative approach as a methodology. For textual analysis, Hayden White theory of history is applied. White's argument about history "... a historical narrative is not only a reproduction of the events reported in it, but also a complex of symbols which gives us directions for finding an icon of the structure of those events in our literary tradition" (The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact, 227) reflects the deconstructive concept of postmodern history.

Key Words: Postmodern, postmodernists, history, self-reflexivity, deconstruction, fiction, metanarrative

Objectives

In course of showing the relation between history and fiction, this research reflects the following objectives. One objective of the research is to explore how postmodernists fictionalize history. The second objective of the research is to discover self-reflexivity in postmodern historical fictions. Likewise, the third objective is to find out how postmodern fictions reflect multiple identities. Finally, the fourth major objective of the research is to scrutinize that history in postmodern fiction appears as a narrative form rather than a collection of proven facts.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research applies the qualitative approach, for the information, clues, data and relevant ideas are taken from the selected theoretical book(s), research articles, reviews and thesis work. Unlike the research done on a select novel or any primary text, this research focuses on the representation of history in postmodern fiction caused by postmodernism, and the concept of rewriting of history. Therefore, the methodology applied here is entirely based on interpretation and discussion.

As far as the broad theoretical framework is concerned, Hayden White's, a postmodernist philosopher and theorist's, postmodern theory of history is applied, which is against the conventional or traditional history. According to White, historical facts cannot be represented objectively because they cannot exist independently of the historian. He argues that historical events can only be reached through documents and other texts and historiography turns historical events into historical facts. Historical events and thoughts are regarded fragmentary and incomplete. In "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," White argues, ". . . histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles" (223) in place of focusing on chronicles as in traditional histories. White's argument about history ". . . a historical narrative is not only a reproduction of the events reported in it, but also a complex of symbols which gives us directions for finding an icon of the structure of those events in our literary tradition" (227) reflects the deconstructive concept of postmodern history.

Introduction

This paper shows how history is represented in postmodern fiction. Since postmodern fiction reflects events in fragmented form, history is reflected in fragmented form, which is contrary to the traditional fiction whose plot is linear and history in the traditional or conventional history is linear. History is the record of past events, which means history is the representation of the past. But, the difference is the representation of history in the fiction. History is represented in literature in the form of drama, poetry, essays, short stories and fictions. As for an example, William Shakespeare's historical plays represent the history of past nations such as England that are mentioned. Likewise, Charles Dickens' novels such as *Oliver Twist* represent London of Victorian England. Homer's *Odyssey* represents the then Greek history. These literary writings reflect the traditional or conventional history, whereas postmodern fictions give space for historiography in the fragmented form. The history that postmodern fiction represents is in a narrative form rather than just a collection of proven forms that conventional fictions include.

Literature is said to be the mirror of human or non-human world. All forms of literature reflect the world whether it is the human world or the non-human world about which the literary writing is produced. Writers or philosophers of literature do the mimesis of the world reflecting life of the concerned human characters or non-human characters. All great philosophers including Plato and Aristotle have philosophized their views on the representation of life in literature. In *The Postmodern Representation of Reality in Peter*

Ackroyd's Chhatterton, Arya Aryan's view "such a literary discussion of representation begins with the ancient Greeks. The idea of the representation of reality is of no exception. The representational or mimetic view of literature dates back to two philosophical thinkers: Aristotle and Plato" (16) indicates how representation was an issue even in the past. In one way, it is like the representation of human or non-human history in literature. But, when literature is confined to fictions, life is represented in fictions differently today than it was done in the past. In "Representation and Novel," John Gibson argues:

One should acknowledge why philosophers of literature are at times tempted by the idea that literary fictions are in the business of offering mimeses of essences, universals, and the like. For it can seem that we need recourse to metaphysical talk of this sort if we are to have an adequate story to tell of how a fictional mimesis could be of interest from the point of view of the real. The idea that fictions are mimetic renderings of essential or universal aspects of human circumstance offers a powerful, if ultimately empty, way of identifying what we find in fictions that can repay the worldly interests we bring to the novel. (227)

The above quoted passage indicates that on the one hand fictions represent the world; on the other hand, it indicates that history is represented in fictions.

The modernists challenged the classical or conventional historical fictions and focused on subjectivization of history. Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and so on have played a significant role in deconstructing the traditional historical fictions. In *Writing History as a Prophet*, Elisabeth Wesseling argues:

In order to remedy the classical historical novel's famed shallowness, modernist writers sought to change the focus of this generic model. The Waverley model concentrated on the depiction of external circumstances of life and used characters as vehicles for conveying historical information. The modernists reversed this hierarchy, which resulted in a subjectivization of history. This innovation can be clarified against the background of T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). Eliot's essay elaborates a specific concept of literary history which can also be applied to history at large, since both live on into the present as collections of texts, or as objects which are interpreted as if they were texts. (75)

The modernists' interest focused on the personal, rather than the collective past, besides a few significant exceptions, which indicates their inclination towards subjectivization of history. The postmodernists' also treat history subjectively as modernists do, but they focus on metanarratives in course of dealing with history in fictions. Robert Scholes' views "It has happened while we were unaware. The major novels of the past decade or so have tended strongly to the apparently worn-out form of the historical novel" (*Fabulation and Metafiction*, 206) indicates how conventional history has been outdated due to emergence of postmodern fictions.

Besides, one very important aspect of history or historical fiction was that it was like the vehicle for discovering and reflecting truth in the past. So, historical events were chronically arranged and displayed objectively. But, truth-telling aspect of conventional history has

been questioned and challenged today. In “Historicizing Fiction and Fictionalizing History: The Case of E. L. Doctorow,” Cushing Strout claims:

The historicizing of the novel, characteristic of the nineteenth century, has been followed in the twentieth century by the subversion of narrative in such "post-modern" writers as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Donald Barthelme, while the influence of structuralism on historical theory has promoted the fictionalizing of history rather than the establishment of its truth-telling power. (424)

In the contemporary fiction, history is not objectively treated to convey the truth, but history is fictionalized and treated subjectively.

History is fictionalized in the postmodern fictions quite objectively. The influence of science and technology upon postmodern fictions is so powerful that postmodern narrative techniques have drastically changed. In the Preface of *The Postmodern Representation of Reality in Peter Ackroyd's Chatterton*, Arya Aryan states:

In our rapidly digitizing age, we are constantly subjected to multiple perspectives, mass media, and waves of information (and often misinformation). The postmodern narrative and its storytelling techniques has emerged in recent decades as a crucial way of engaging with and navigating our experiences of representation, meaning, and historical understanding. The postmodern novel indeed reveals to us that literature as well as history are socially constructed.

Thus, postmodern fictions reflect the idea that literature and history are socially constructed. So, they should be studied and taken subjectively.

History is applied as a theme in postmodern fiction. The historical novels written during the eighties were different from the historical novels written in the previous era. In “Postmodernist Historical Novels: Jeanette Winterson’s and Salman Rushdie’s Novels as Historiographic Metafictions,” Mustafa Kirca argues, “The historical novels in the eighties, the era being marked with the flourishing of many fictions written in the postmodern novel genre, differ greatly from the historical novels written in the previous years” (14).

Thus, history is represented in postmodern fictions different ways. Firstly, this study tries to discover how history appears as a narrative form rather than a collection of proven facts. Secondly, it tries to analyse how postmodernists fictionalize history. Thirdly, it focuses on multivocality. Fourthly, it seeks to discover self-reflexivity in postmodernist historical fictions. Fifthly, it shows how postmodern history like postcolonial history tries to raise voices from the peripheri. Finally, history in postmodern fictions is written in fragmentary form.

Discussion and Analysis

The research studies the representation of history in the postmodern fiction. Tradition fiction/realist fiction, modern fiction and postmodern fiction are different and are taken, studied and analysed differently since they are based on the philosophy of the eras. Jean-

Francois Lyotard's views "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged by applying familiar categories to the text or the work" (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on knowledge*, 81) deconstructs the traditional ideas or concepts about history and fiction. In *Experimental Fiction*, Julie Armstrong writes that Jurgen Habermas's views on postmodernism are different from Lyotard's views stating about Habermas "He disagreed with Lyotard, arguing that various postmodern theories are an attack on modernity itself. Habermas argues that postmodernism is no different from modernism in certain formal respects. Indeed, postmodernism is a knowing modernism, a self-reflexive modernism" (100).

Postmodern philosophy treats reality as a construction. Postmodern fiction reflects intense self-reflexivity which implies the author's consciousness of the rhetoric of the text. The narrator of the postmodern fiction becomes self-conscious who seems to narrate his/her own writing process and its fictionality to convey the message to the readers that the novel is a construct of language. Wesseling's argument "Postmodernist writing is basically fiction of the medium. Rather than representing the external world, postmodern literature folds in upon itself in order to explore its linguistic and literary conventions" (3) reveals the self-reflexive nature of the postmodern fiction. Self-reflexivity appears as a counter-argument against established constructions of reality whose function is to go against the established construction of reality. In oneway, self-reflexivity comes so as to break the illusion of reality, which is also one of the major features of postmodern fiction.

Besides, history is used as a major theme in the postmodern fiction. As for the instances, two contemporary fictions can be taken- Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse- Five* whose theme is the history of the second world war. History is represented in both the fictions differently because history is represented in postmodern fictions entirely different from it was represented in the traditional realist fictions. Since both history and fiction are blende together in such fictions, they are regarded as historical metafiction. The traditional fictions are not metafiction since history is represented in those fictions chronically, whereas history is mentioned in fragmented form making the readers know that the fiction is actually a fiction, not real story at all. Patricia Waugh's argument "The metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to 'represent' the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be represented" (*Metafiction*, 4) reflects the nature of metafiction that shows the dilemma. As for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in the very beginning of the novel, Vonnegut mentions his own real life experiences as a prisoner of second world war due to his involment in the war in Dresden which was affected by the allied fire bombing. His talk to other characters and us indicates the metanarrative technique of postmodern fiction writer, which indicates that the novel is metafiction. Vonnegut writes "Even then I was supposedly writing a book about Dresden. It wasn't a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima, for instance. I didn't know that, either. There hadn.t been much publicity" (8). Such metanarrative technique is applied in the traditional

novels. Linda Hutcheon's views on historiographic metafiction "[Historiographic metafiction] puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real. This is why I have been calling this historiographic metafiction" (*Poetics of Postmodernism*, 92) also support that postmodern fictions are metafiction.

Likewise, history in traditional fictions focuses on people of great political influence, which also means that the grand narrative concept gets reflected in traditional fictions. But, postmodern fictions deconstruct the grand narrative concepts and give space for peripheral characters, which means that history is written from peripheries in postmodern historical fictions. As for an example, when the traditional history of India has to be written, the key figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and so on are highly valued highlighting their contribution and overlooking the role of the peasants. As for examples, Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and *The Midnight Children* can be taken since they give space to characters from peripheries. Saleem, the character's observation of history indicates it. Rushdie writes in *Shame*:

History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of facts arise, and old, 127 saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few marks: field-patterns, axe-heads, folk-tales, broken pitchers, burial mounds, the fading memory of their youthful beauty. History loves only those who dominate her (124)

Rushdie tries to show how peripheral people's voices get reflected in postmodern fictions. In this way, history in postmodern fictions is like rewriting history deconstructing traditional history. Regarding Rushdie, Kirca's claim "Rushdie manages to include the voice of "peripherals" by reinterpreting the official history of Pakistan from the eyes of the family members of the two central political figures in the novel. As a result, the official history becomes another story among many stories told in Rushdie's novel" (127).

One very important characteristics of postmodern fiction is that it fictionalizes history, which did not happen in the past when the traditional historical fictions were written. Many historians try to give historical events a shape of art that literary writings contain. White states:

Many historians continue to treat their "facts" as though they were "given" and refuse to recognize, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much found as constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him. It is the same notion of objectivity that binds historians to an uncritical use of the chronological framework for their narratives. When historians try to relate their "findings" about the "facts" in what they call an "artistic" manner, they uniformly eschew the techniques of literary representation which Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen have contributed to modern culture. (*The Burden of History*, 43)

Modern and postmodern fiction is in art form and even history according to White is also treated in the art form. In *Experimental Fiction*, Armstrong regards postmodern fiction as an art form and states:

Postmodern fiction is an art form which problematizes the making of both history and fiction. And within postmodern works, history can be seen as a narrative form rather than a collection of proven facts. Brian McHale argues that postmodernists fictionalize history. McHale argues “In postmodernist revisionist historical fiction, history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional and fiction becoming “true” history—and the real world seems to get lost in the shuffle. But of course this is precisely the question postmodernist fiction is designed to raise: real, compared to what?” (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 96).

McHale tries to point out how history is portrayed in postmodern fictions. William Gibson’s view “History itself is seen to be even more obviously a construct, subject to revision” (*Distrust That Particular Flavours*, 52) is similar to McHale’s. White strongly regards history as a narrative form rather than merely a collection of proven facts. According to White, narrative form is the only possible form of representation in the writing of history. In *Metahistory*, White writes:

I treat the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse. Histories (and philosophies of history as well) combine a certain amount of “data,” theoretical concepts for “explaining” these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past. In addition, I maintain, they contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively “historical” explanation should be. This paradigm functions as the “metahistorical” element in all historical works that are more comprehensive in scope than the monograph or archival report. (ix)

Hence, it is logical to accept that postmodern fictions fictionalize history. Regarding White’s views on history and fiction, Kirca analyses:

He proposes in *Metahistory* a theory of narrative that draws parallelisms between history and literature. He argues that traditional historiography uses the narrative form in which historians convey the knowledge of the past and he analyzes the “deep structure of the historical imagination,” claiming that all history contains a deep verbal structure and that a formal theory is needed to analyze the deep structure. (8)

Kirca’s views on White indicate that postmodern fictions reflect metanarrative strategy, which is unlike the traditional strategy applied in representing history in traditional fictions.

Postmodern fictions represent history differently. White writes:

The older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual, must give place to the recognition that we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable. As thus conceived, historical narratives are complex structures in which a world of experience is imagined to exist under at least two modes, one of which is encoded as “real,” the other of which is “revealed” to have been illusory in the course of the narrative. Of course, it is a fiction of the historian that the various states of affairs which he

constitutes as the beginning, the middle, and the end of a course of development are all “actual” or “real” and that he has merely recorded “what happened” in the transition from the inaugural to the terminal phase. (Historical Text As a Literary Artifact, 234)

White wants to convey a message about history that narrative is not simply a record of what has happened one after another event, but how it has happened.

Postmodernists interpret history as fictions, not truth. They regard history as fictions and metaphors according to Noel Carroll. In “Interpretation, History and Narrative,” Carroll comments on Hayden White stating that history is like fictions and metaphors. Carroll’s arguments “White identifies historical discourse with interpretation and historical interpretation with narrativization. A historical narrative is not a transparent representation or copy of a sequence of past events” (146) show that historical narrative is like a fiction. In this context, White states:

To emplot real events as a story of a specific kind (or as a mixture of stories of a specific kind) is to trope these events. This is because stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a “real” story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a “true” story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions which means, of course, that they can be “true” in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which any figure of speech can be true. Is this true enough? (27)

Thus, history is merely fiction in the postmodern age, only narrative strategy is different. SO, history is represented in the postmodern fictions in a narrative form rather than merely collection of events.

Besides, many critics on history and postmodern fictions, critique that traditional concept of history has died or history has died. According to them, history has disappeared, but rewriting history or post-history has started since the end of the second world war. In History and Post-history, Morrison writes about the death of history and the rise of post-history giving references of so many writers and critics such as Francis Fukuyama. Morrison states that according to Fukuyama the history ended when the USSR collapsed between 1989-1991 and communism also collapsed then. Morrison states:

Amongst the most complacent of Western commentators, the apparent victory of free market capitalism against socialism in the former Soviet Union led to a rash of fresh pronouncements about the ‘End of History’ in the early 1990s. According to the influential political theorist Francis Fukuyama, writing in 1989, the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy at the end of the Cold War meant that history was simply over because we had reached a point beyond which nothing more of significance was going to happen. (*Contemporary Fiction*, 23)

Morrison relates Fukuyama’s concept of end of the tradition history which can be related to the end of grand narrative or grand history or linear plot of history. So, Lyotard’s view that grand narrative has lost its credibility in the postmodern world is quite relevant here. Lyotard

views that history in postmodern fiction is represented challenging conventional notion of history breaking linear plot:

What we call philosophies of history, the great narratives by means of which we attempt to order the multitude of events, certainly argue this idea [of emancipation] in different ways: a Christian narrative in which Adam's sin is redeemed through love; the Aufklärer narrative of emancipation from ignorance and servitude thanks to knowledge and egalitarianism; the speculative narrative of the realization of the universal idea through the dialectic of the concrete; the Marxist narrative of emancipation from exploitation and alienation through the socialisation of labour; the capitalist narrative of emancipation from poverty through technical and industrial development. These various narratives all situate the data supplied by events within the course of a history whose end, even if it is out of reach, is called freedom. (315)

Lyotard means to say that the great narratives of emancipation and a linear, progressive history have been ended. Jean Baudrillard also seems to agree with Lyotard and states that to write narratives of history based on sequential framework is not possible today as the world is fragmented by wars into different segments. In *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard expresses his views on representation of history:

So far as history is concerned, its telling has become impossible because that telling (recitatum) is, by definition, the possible recurrence of a sequence of meanings. Now, through the impulse for total dissemination and circulation, every event is granted its own liberation; every fact becomes atomic, nuclear, and pursues its trajectory in the void. This is how it is able to achieve a velocity of no-return which carries it out of history once and for all. (2)

Baudrillard means to say that traditional history in the form of linear progression cannot be written and hence postmodern fictions represent history in a non-linear way. John Martin Mcleod writes about Baudrillard "Critics of Baudrillard are sometimes impatient with his joyful celebration of simulations and fragmentation. However, *The Illusion of the End* displays unexpected anxieties that complicate Baudrillard's view of history. He seems unsettled by the damaging consequences of dissolving history into representation, with the result that any representation of the past can be constructed at will" (12).

One very important issue is the fluid identity that is represented as one characteristics of postmodern fictions. The ride of women's movements has changed the gender roles and hence identity of women has been changed. Morrison argues:

What were once constituted as gender norms has been called into question, leading to a newly fluid and unstable view of identity; this has been key to the cultural shift which marks the postmodern, a space where different voices can be heard. Where there was once a more-clear definition of gender roles and gender spaces, both roles and space have now blurred. More and more men are becoming homemakers, choosing to raise children, while women are taking on the role of breadwinner; therefore, concepts of gender roles have undergone a transition. (*Experimental Fiction*, 110)

Thus, the history of identity of women is differently represented in postmodern fictions. In this sense postmodern fictions reflects multiple voices or multivocality, which traditional fictions failed to do.

Conclusions

This paper shows that history is represented in postmodern fictions in a fragmentary form, not in a linear form. As postmodern fiction is an art form, it narrates history in the form of a story and even characters let the readers know that it is fiction rather than a real story. So, the postmodern fiction is metafiction and the narrative strategy is metanarrative. In other words, it is structured as rewriting of history challenging the traditional history. It deconstructs the traditional history of fictionalizing history. The narrative becomes more important than the facts and information. Since the postmodern era is the era of questioning reality, truth, facts and so on which were judged objectively, the history is written and studied subjectively instead of objectively. Major findings of the research are as follows: postmodernists fictionalize history, they reflect self-reflexivity of characters, they reveal multiple identities and finally, metanarrative strategy is main narrative strategy in postmodern fictions.

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