

CONTEMPORARY FICTION AND HISTORICAL ‘AMNESIA’

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The paper enumerates that in Postmodernity, there is an interface between history and fiction. It also highlights that both history and fiction are signifying systems and human constructs. An attempt has been made to show this problematic nexus between history and fiction in contemporary fiction such as John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* and Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*.

[I]

Postmodern or contemporary fiction abandons some of the features of realist and modernist modes of historical representation. It is extremely intensely self-reflexive. Postmodern critics such as Jean Francois Lyotard, Thomas Docherty and Robert Holton points out that Postmodern or Contemporary fiction portrays “ ‘the heterodox historical moment’, a form of historical representation which destabilizes the ‘hegemonic hold on historical discourse’ and allows ‘marginalized people to emerge as equal historical subjects and narrators’ ”.[qt in Baker 2000:123]

The idea of postmodernism with reference to history is that every representation of the past is tinged with some ideological implications. The postmodern ideology is paradoxical for it claims and denies its own truth, questions the history it seeks to reconstruct and critiques the ideologies it is influenced by. It is a part of the postmodern ideology not to ignore cultural bias and certain conventions and to even question its own authority.

The contemporary novel is enmeshed in the web of fiction and narrative. It raises certain issues regarding the interaction of historiography and fiction: the nature of identity and subjectivity, the question of reference and representation, the intertextual nature of the past and so forth. Much of contemporary fiction offers postmodernist contradiction; comprises those novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages.

The postmodernists believe that a single, correct and objective recording of the past is unfathomable. There are various versions of history depending upon the interpretation of different historians and their style of presentation. It provides an opportunity to different groups, communities, and identities to reclaim the past. Any version which claims to be a totalized version, can be competed by plural and unexpected histories. This also accommodates Foucauldian view that the historian’s task of eliminating discontinuities for creating a coherent view of the past is his means of controlling the past and gaining power over it. Thus, history in postmodernism “becomes histories..... histories not told, retold, untold. History as it never was. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, eradicated” [ESI 2000: 11].

Thus, it seems that postmodernism emphasizes that there are all kinds of orders and systems in the world and they are all human constructs. In other words, the world is not meaningless, but that any meaning that exists is of man's own creation.

Postmodernism questions the very bases of any certainty (history, subjectivity, reference) and of any standards of judgment. Postmodernism seeks a dialogue with the past in the light of the present which can be called as what Ihab Hasan says “ ‘the presence of the past’ or perhaps its ‘present-ification’” [Hasan, Hassan 1983:20]. Historiography, according to Derrida, is always, teleological: it imposes a meaning on the past and does so by postulating an end (and/or origin). So does fiction. The difference in postmodern fiction is in its challenging self-consciousness of that imposition that renders its provisional. [Hutcheon 1988: 97]

Contemporary fiction self-consciously points to this self-referentiality.

Jameson laments the failure of the postmodern novel to offer a plausible representation of the historical past. ‘The historical novel’, he says,

can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once become ‘pop history’). . . . If there is any realism left here, it is a ‘realism’ that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach. [Jameson 1992:25].

Jameson holds the view that postmodernism has failed to recover ‘authentic’ historical experience in narrative form. To Ahmad, Postmodern culture, suggests that ‘one is free to choose any and all subject positions. . . . because history has no subjects or collective projects in any case’ [Ahmad 1994:130]. Aijaz Ahmad, a postmodern critic, is inclined towards Marxist ideology that the identification of individual and collective identity, is a significant feature of historical representation. Thus, for Jameson and Ahmad, the postmodern historical novel, is more concerned with the creation of history, the rediscovery of historicity in the reading process itself. Baudrillard states that history in postmodern condition is a “lost referential”, we face the ‘death pangs of the real and of the rational that open unto an age of simulation’. Retrieving the past becomes almost a fruitless and hopeless activity, because there is nothing worthwhile to go back to; in the absence of a controlling idea “only nostalgia endlessly accumulates” [Baudrillard 1994:44].

[II]

John Fowles, a contemporary British novelist, treat fiction as a historical document. In his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he reiterates that our ‘real’ world can never be the ‘real’ world of the novel. This splits open, expose the levels of illusion. Patricia Waugh points out that :

Throughout *The French Lieutenant's Woman* there is an Abundance of frame-breaks more overt than this, particularly where the twentieth century narrator suddenly appears as a character in the *histoire* as well as in the *discours*. [Waugh 1984:33]

Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* rewrites the Victorian realist novel and the historical romance but also offers itself as one of many possible 'versions'. Fowles manipulates realistic conventions and Victorian history. In his epigraphs and documentary footage, Fowles displays information about the Victorians, in such a way that perhaps that they themselves do not know about their selves much as the author do. However, Fowles can know them only from his own 20th century perspective, his own version of history. The epigraphs throw light on the age from within its own perspective.

The novel reflects British social and political evolution of 19th century British history. There are some historical references in the novel. Readers are reminded that Sam's role playing is *ante*Stanislavski. Charles, after consummation with Sarah, is compared to a city struck out of a quiet sky by an atom bomb. The readers are assured that Ernestina died on the day Hitler invaded Poland and the Gestapo would have found a place for Mrs. Poulteney.

Peter Conradi points out that the narrator of the novel,

Advertises a conspicuous range of intellectual goods and services – always ready for an energetic digression into matters cosmetic, millinery, psychosexual, etymological, political, literary- critical and theological- and shows a keenly fashionable awareness of appropriate socio-historical décor. It has a Peacockian relish for cultural free enterprise, quirk and quiddity, and is much given to a historical transaction in which it explains each epoch to its neighbor. [Conradi, 1982:69]

Fictive past and historical present is blended in the text. Mary's great-great granddaughter is a famous English film actress; the narrator possess a Toby jug bought by Sarah; a cottage on Ware Commons now belongs to a fashionable London architect. As Conradi points out, in the novel,

A neo-gothic collision occurs between a ghostly imagined fictive past and a phantom historical present in which, while history 'validates' the novel by making it an enclave of itself, the novel also makes of history a species of client-text subserving its own needs. [Conradi 1982 :72]

Fowles is more concerned with the ways in which self can change and is subject to history. He claims that he is torn between the desire to write a Victorian novel and the desire to demonstrate self-conscious wisdom of his own age. The exploration of history and freedom is focused through the characterization of Sarah. She is projected like a mythical figure and as such she stands outside 'history' and even fiction. She haunts Fowles in his 'real' life. She achieves this condition in novel through deliberate artifice. She devises a fictional version of her life that she is an amorous woman so as to remain outside conventional Victorian society in the role of a social outcaste. Sarah is seductive, mysterious and unpredictable. Fowles thus creates a heroine who dominates the most part of the novel and determines its different interpretations through her supposedly lost virginity. However, at the end, Fowles advocates rereading of the novel by revealing her decision to deceive society into believing that she is a 'disgraced woman' wherein the fact remains that she has never lost her virginity, which it values much. Fowles' heroine thus, simultaneously fulfills contradictory male desires. Sarah combines both halves of the Victorian

typology; she is at once a virgin and a whore too. Thus 19th century ‘mystery’ in this context unites with 20th century oppression.

Charles, a character in the novel, calls himself a Darwinist but the fact remains that he had not really understood Darwin. This reflects 20th century ethos in which relativizing consequences of Darwinism become apparent. Charles becomes ‘a man struggling to overcome history’ (FLW, 257) standing against the pressures of plot itself.

Thus the novel treads a porous border between the need to authenticate itself and the need to denounce its obligation towards history.

Thomas Pynchon, a postmodern American novelist focuses more on the network of relations existing either between characters or between characters and social and historical patterns of meaning. As Mendelson points out:

Pynchon also tries to attend to the force with which history, politics, economics, and the necessities of science and language shape personal choices and are in turn shaped by those choices.

[Ed. Mendelson 1978:5]

Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* deals with the adventures of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon who charted the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland in the 1760s which later came to be known as Mason-Dixon line. The two protagonists of the novel seek to thrust rational order on time and space. They renew the political and spatial boundaries of the New World by applying universal, scientific laws. The novel portrays an 18th century world permeated by scientific truths and stripped of fantastic events.

Mason and Dixon indulge in a brief naval fight prior to the beginning of their professional relationship. They ponder on their misfortune:

It seems not to belong in either of their lives. ‘Was there a mistake in the Plan of the Day? Did we get a piece of someone else’s History, a fragment spall’d off of some Great Moment, - perhaps the late Engagement at Quiberon Bay, - such as now and then may fly into the ev’ryday paths of lives less dramatick? And there we are, with our Wigs askew.’

‘Happen,’ Dixon contributes in turn, ‘we were never meant at all to go to Bencoolen, - someone needed a couple of Martyrs, and we inconveniently surviv’d ... ?’ (MD, 44)

This hints at the astronomer’s and the surveyor’s doubt that Mason and Dixon may be only marginal figures, thrust to the centre of historical events. This suspicion is further supported by Cherrycoke’s confirmation that their efforts in America were ‘brave, scientific beyond my understanding, and ultimately meaningless’: their line is ‘but eight years later to be nullified by the War for Independence’ (MD, 8). Pynchon here plays on the historical irony that the Mason - Dixon line, made irrelevant by the US’s anti-colonial victory, should become significant in America’s later history. The marginal, the ‘nullified’ become significant as we look back on Cherrycoke.

The desire to escape a fixed identity and location seems to be the globalization of domination and colonial subjugation. Mason and Dixon come across the institution of slavery in the Cape. Mason is seduced by the vroom girls; he even impregnates the slave-girl Austra. Dixon watches the scarred walls of Lancaster town, the site of massacre of twenty six Native Americans. In fact, *Mason and Dixon* portrays the unacknowledged relationship of slavery and

colonialism to the enlightened principles of the Age of Reason. Cherrycoke is advised that he should not inhale Indian Hemp if ever he smoke it. Pynchon alludes to President Bill Clinton's clarification in 1992 of the youthful restraint he had displayed when indulging in similar, private pleasures or vices. The reference to a song apparently called 'Philadelphia Girls' enumerates novel's play on late 20th century cultural elements.

It seems that the characterization in the novel remain tied to a past whose loss can never be undone and whose legacy can't be ignored. The readers realize that the histories of characters are fabricated,yet they are entertained by characters' idiosyncratic tales of romance and adventure. As Baker points out:

The novel reflects on the history of the modern subject,the modern history of racial subjugation, and the pain of losing what was perhaps never really there. [Baker 2000:136]

The novel embodies the sense that even absent history hurts. Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* exemplifies the inadequacy of a postmodern reimagining of history. The novel celebrates postmodern textual play as it models its reversal of narrative order on the capabilities of video. The novel is about the life of a Nazi doctor,a member of the medical staff in Auschwitz who later practices medicine in the USA. The novel is nothing but a narrative mimicry of film or videotape running in reverse.It applies such features of textual play to the writing or reimagining of a historical narrative thereby enabling it to be categorized as what Linda Hutcheon labeled 'historiographic metafiction'.

The novel also hints at continuity between the rhetoric of Nazi propoganda and the kitsch melodrama of American tabloid culture. As Tod Friendly reads his American tabloid, the narrator in him reports its contents to the reader:

Greta Garbo, Iread, has been reborn as a cat.All this stuff abouttwins . A Nordic superrace will shortly descend from the cosmic iceclouds; they will rule the earth for a thousand years. All this stuff about *Atlantis*. [TA,20]

Later in the novel, when Odilo (formerly Tod) reached Auschwitz, Nazi propoganda replays the same messages he first read in America. The association of Nazi Germany with culture of contemporary America mocks the assumed grandiosity of Nazi rhetoric.

Time's Arrow rewrites the history of the Nazis' Final Solution. James Wood in his review of the novel remarks:

The backwards momentum of the Nazi's life, narrated by a soul who knows what has already happened, is not unlike the way in which a guilty man (say a Nazi war criminal) goes back, again and again,over past crimes. Memory, especially guilt memory,forces us to live our lives backwards. [qt in Baker 2000:141]

The backward repetition of the events of Odilo's life, encouraged possibly by guilt memory,leads to distortion of the facts:

'The world,after all,here in Auschwitz,has a new habit.' It makes sense.' (TA,138)

The novel depicts how Nazi doctors and camp functionaries in their memoirs tried to justify their actions.

The narrator here is the ‘Auschwitz self’ created by Odilo to enable him to perform his genocidal duties without any feeling of remorse. Lifton points out that Nazi doctors practice *doubling* which involves ‘the formation of a second, relatively autonomous self, which enables one to participate in evil’.[qt in Baker 2000:142]. He calls this second self as the ‘Auschwitz self’, which in fact replaces original self and persuades the doctor to convince himself of his own innocence. Lifton further explains that in ‘doubling’:

one part of the self ‘disavows’ another part. What is repudiated is not reality itself-the individual doctor was aware of what he was doing via the Auschwitz self – but the meaning of that reality. The Nazi doctor knew that he selected, but did not interpret selection as murder. [qt in Baker 2000:142]

The novel reflects on this distortion of the significance of historical acts and events.

The binary opposition between healing/killing is nullified. This is evident from the fact that the people who were assigned the task of killing children behaved as if they were showering the blessings of medical science on children. This is their fictional interpretation of the situation. One glaring example is of Dr Heinz, who excused his actions in the court by pointing out that a fatal overdose had to be prescribed to ensure that an excitable child would avoid endangering itself.

Time’s Arrow seems to be postmodern attempt to rewrite history of the Holocaust, it is a postmodern reworking of a historical phenomena. This rewriting exemplifies the Nazi justification of the act. Thus, the backwards form of narration is determined both by its focus through Odilo’s Auschwitz self and its imitation of a video or film running in reverse.

The narrative of *Time’s Arrow* has distorted the history of the *Endlosung*. As Cynthia Ozick points out:

‘A dream of reversal, of reconstruction: who has not, in the fifty years since the European devastation, swum off into this dream? ... ‘As if the reel of history- and who does not see history as tragic cinema? – could be run backward’.[qt in Baker 2000:148]

It can be safely assumed that human beings are handcuffed to history. Interpreting our history is the only way we have of accessing it. As soon as we begin to interpret, we begin to offer up our own version of reality. Thus, these contemporary novels points to self-reflexiveness, a dominant postmodern trait.

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