

Historiographic Metafiction: A Postmodern Narrative Technique in Literature

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Abstract: *The present research paper aims to study historiographic metafictional narrative strategies that seem to be especially pertinent to the novelists of postmodern era. By employing the technique of historiographic metafiction, the postmodern novelists have attempted to blur the distinction between historical narratives and fictional narratives. The practitioners of postmodernism in literature have achieved the subversion of objective historical discourse through the intermingling of metafictional strategies and historical reality. With this technique, the novelists have attempted to fictionalize history by merging history and fiction and thus making it more interesting and entertaining.*

Keywords: Postmodernism, Metafiction, Self-reflexivity, Literary artifact, Emplotment

I. INTRODUCTION

In her critical treatise *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon labels postmodern historical novels as ‘historiographic metafictions’ as these novels thematise the postmodern philosophy of history and incorporate metafictional narrative strategies to problematize the distinction between history and fiction. Historiographic metafiction is an experimental genre which is epistemological in nature. It raises “issues about the knowledge of the past and the bearing that narrative has on that knowledge” (Currie: 1998, 65). Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction is governed by the paradox created by the intermingling of metafictional self-reflexivity and historical reality in novels, which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages. In historiographic metafiction, the distinction between history and fiction is blurred. History and fiction are identified as narrative discourses and linguistic constructs.

II. METAFICTION

The coinage of the term ‘Metafiction’ is generally attributed to the American novelist and critic William H. Gass in the 1960s and was popularized by Robert Scholes. Various other terms have been used to the phenomenon of metafiction such as ‘introverted’ ‘introspected’, ‘narcissistic’, ‘auto – representational’, ‘ self-conscious fiction’, ‘self-reflexive fiction’, ‘anticipation’ and ‘fabulation’.

The term ‘metafiction’ has been defined variously by various critics like Linda Hutcheon (1983), Patricia Waugh (1990) and Lary McCaffery (1982). Hutcheon describes metafiction as “fiction about fiction that is fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (Hutcheon, 1). She terms it as ‘narcissistic’ and maintains that “it provides within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its processes of production and reception” (Ibid, 1). Patricia Waugh in her work *Metafiction: The theory and Practice of self-conscious Fiction* defines the concept of metafiction as:

[F]ictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attentions to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh, 20).

Waugh uses the term ‘metafiction’ to denote a kind of fiction that is conscious of its own status as a fictional construct while, at the same time, itself consciously draws attention to its own status as an artifact. Metafiction intentionally makes efforts to distort the distinction between fiction and reality. This kind of distorting the distinction between fiction and reality exhibits a critical approach towards the conventions and assumptions of fiction. The practitioners of

metafiction constantly attempt to investigate the world-text relationship by destabilizing and experimenting with literary conventions.

The above definition makes it clear that postmodern metafiction is experimental in nature and it subverts the assumptions of earlier modes of fiction. The above definition also puts forward the dual functions of the narrative techniques used in metafiction that are paradoxical. On one hand, like a conventional novel, metafiction presents us with a story by projecting a fictional world. On the other hand, simultaneously it also makes a statement about its own status as fiction and thus undermines the fictional illusion it has just formed. Metafiction, therefore, is also about its nature as fiction and the literary conventions exploited in its creation.

In short, metafiction methodically invites the reader's attention to its linguistic and narrative structure and to its fictionality with the aim of exploring the relationship between fiction and reality. Metafiction problematizes 19th century view of objective reality and regards reality as a provisional phenomenon (Waugh, 7). The practitioners of metafiction believe that it is impossible to describe an objective world. They believe that reality is not objective but subjectively constructed. Metafiction serves as a subversive strategy and functions as an alternative to the customary Eurocentric forms of narration.

Metafictional text is *theoretical* as it is aware of its own identity as fiction. Metafiction thus is a hybrid form of literature and criticism. Waugh also stresses the theoretical aspect of metafiction which, to her, is marked in its attempt to "explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction" (Ibid, 2).

Although the use of metafictional techniques is a feature of postmodernist fiction, this doesn't imply that all contemporary fiction comes under the banner of metafiction. It also does not imply that there were no metafictional elements in earlier works. In fact, metafiction is not a recent but an age old phenomenon. Hutcheon argues that metafiction is "a part of long novelistic tradition." Waugh also argues that metafictionality is the essence of all fiction. However, the postmodernist novelists have shown greater consciousness of the modes of operation and techniques involved in the act of fiction making. In postmodern fiction, a very high amount of overt metafictionality is observed.

III. HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

The postmodern historical novel which Hutcheon labels 'historiographic metafiction' is modelled on the postmodern conception of history. The postmodern conception of history bases its arguments on poststructuralist theory and claims that history like language is a human construct and proposes the existence of plural and contradictory histories. The postmodern concept of history shows interest in the act of writing histories. It believes that there is no one universal history but multiple, conflicting, 'finite' histories. Cox and Reynolds rightly remark, "The postmodernist view of history rejects the idea of history as a directly accessible, unitary past and substitutes for it the conception of 'histories' as ongoing series of human constructions" (Cox, Reynolds:1993, 4). Thus postmodernism believes in multiple histories and asserts history as a human construct.

Hayden White's views on the postmodern philosophy of history have been influential in shaping the postmodernist historical novels. Hayden White, who is influenced by poststructuralist theories, argues that 'narrative form is the only possible form of representation in the writing of history' (White: 1973, 9). In his *Metahistory*, Hayden White proposes a theory of narrative that draws similarities between history and literature. White's "Historical text as Literary Artifact" is an influential essay in which he elaborates his concept of "emplotment". White argues that history is a text and history writing consists of process of "emplotment" in which chronicles turn into stories. Histories use chronicles and make stories out them and the making of stories out of chronicles is the reason for the presence of some story elements in history writing. The presence of story element in history writing brings history writing in parallel with literary writing.

IV. EMPLOTMENT IN HISTORICAL NOVEL

Hayden White explains: "The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motivic repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all the techniques that we would normally accept find in the emplotment of a novel or a play" (White: 2001, 233). Through the process of 'emplotment', the historian orders the events and shapes them into a meaningful and complete story. White suggests that historical facts "can be emplotted in a number

of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of these events and to endow them with different meanings serving different ideologies and worldviews (Ibid, 224). White further argues that the historians can trace past events in chronicles, documents or archives, but they can never reach the contexts of the past events in any definite way. The historian has to invent context in order to make past events meaningful and significant. As a result of the 'emplotment' historical works are 'verbal fictions', the content of which are as much invented as found and the forms which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (Ibid, 222).

With his concept of 'emplotment', White blurs the distinction between history writing and literary writing. White argues that historical discourses are no different from literary discourses. The tools and techniques used in the act of fiction writing are no different from those used by the historian. The historian cannot claim that he has presented authentic history. His description of past events is his interpretation and not the reality. White maintains that there is no such thing as objectivity within the field of history; historical narratives are always biased. White's theory of history seriously challenges the assumptions upon which the field of history has traditionally been based.

The postmodern philosophy of history bridges the gap between history and fiction. The blurring of distinction between history and fiction gives rise to a new kind of "fictional" history. It believes that history is no way pure and real, because "historical narratives do not reveal meanings that are always there; rather they construct meaning as much as fictional narratives do" (Bas: 1999, 16).

The postmodern fiction which Hutcheon labels as 'historiographic metafiction' is obsessed by history. It "combines what Bradbury has called 'argument by poetics' (metafiction) with 'argument by historicism' (historiographic) in such a way as to inscribe a mutual interrogation within the text themselves" (Hutcheon: 1988, 42). Its main concern is historical events. History becomes its subject matter and it reflects on historiography. It combines metafictional techniques with a particular and deep attention to history and includes all the three genres such as literature, history and theory as one. Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction is a particular form of novel in which the domains of history, theory and literature are incorporated. It is the self-conscious combination of history and fiction. It believes that both history and fiction are human constructs. Hutcheon claims that historiographic metafiction's "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon:1988,5) Historiographic metafiction incorporates metafictional self-conscious mode of writing which is engaged in "rethinking and reworking of the forms and the contents of the past (Hutcheon:1988 , 5). The historiographic metafiction attempts to revise the contents of the official historical record and at the same time it is concerned with examining the forms of the past texts. Historiographic metafiction merges both history and fiction; history and fiction are both identified as narrative discourses and linguistic constructs. Historiographic metafiction, thus asserts that both history and fiction are human constructs, signifying systems.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, historiographic metafiction is quite contradictory in nature. It is the combination of history and metafiction. Hutcheon maintains that "the meeting of historiography and metafiction produces a new kind of experimental writing uniquely capable of fulfilling the poetics of postmodernism" (Hutcheon:1995,71). The fictionalization of history in historiographic metafiction is achieved through the metafictional narrative strategies such as self-reflexive mode of narration, non-linear narrative structure, self-conscious narrative devices, parody and intertextuality.

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