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### Fictionalizing History: Narrative Strategy in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*

Postmodernist treatments of the past and history are typically criticized by historians. For the postmodernists, history is nothing but a text: the principal problem of historical representation is that of narrativization. When it comes to representing the past, there is no important distinction between fact and fiction. Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*, offers interesting versions of different historical events, individuals and societies. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, the narrative functions in such a way as to expose the implicit claims of narrative to the "truth of history." Here the story-telling aspect of narrative is used to highlight the idea of history as a text among other texts. The novel shows the process of textualisation of history through the narrator, who usually reminds the reader of the importance of narrativization.

The most important postmodernist techniques such as metafiction, magic realism, intertextuality, polyphony, parallelism, and multiple perspectives are widely used in this novel. Every text is a mosaic of references to other texts, genres, and discourses. The novel questions universal truths and empirical histories by emphasizing that narratives, fictional as well as historical, are subjectively constructed; they are, therefore, capable of appropriating and transforming fact and fiction.

Postmodernism tends to view the past as a vast, fragmented, decontextualized, and synchronic accumulation of forms, genres, and ideas. For the postmodernists, the past has no reality. History is nothing but a text: the principal problem of historical representation is that of narrativization. When it comes to representing the past, there is no important distinction between fact and fiction.

Modern historical fiction explores the nature of historical knowledge, questions the authenticity of historical truth, and internalizes historical events according to the writer's understanding and interpretation of history. It assumes that history, like fiction, is inevitably subjective to the historian's personal inclination as well as to the limitation of historical data. Postmodern historical fiction fictionalizes and appropriates history, and puts history in a subordinate position. It subverts established history by inventing other possibilities of historical development. It retrieves the buried histories of the historically suppressed or silenced masses, to reveal the hidden power struggle in the establishment of historical knowledge. It no longer aims at portraying history as "how it really was," but challenges the very belief that history is a realm which can be accessed in an objective and unbiased way. It is strongly concerned with the idea that versions of the past depend on who tells them. Moreover, the contemporary historical novel draws the reader's attention to the fact that past events, just like fiction, are mostly mediated through language. Since the connection between language and reality is arbitrary and unstable, each account of the past must inevitably remain a subjective construct. Contemporary historical novels thus connect and self-consciously analyze the workings of historiography and of fiction-writing. In order to describe this, Linda Hutcheon coined the term "historiographic metafiction."

This mode of writing finds its expression in Indian writings also. Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*, offers interesting versions of different historical events,

individuals and societies. The relationship between history and fiction in the novel is playfully interactive. In the novel, the narrative functions in such a way as to expose the implicit claims of narrative to the “truth of history.” Here the story-telling aspect of narrative is used to highlight the idea of history as a text among other texts. In the novel, history merges with fiction, and facts get blurred with fable. Rushdie plays with the idea of history as a form of story which is always woven out of the fabric of fables. The novel shows the process of textualisation of history through the narrator. The narrator usually reminds the reader of the importance of narrativization. We can say that the novel is fashioned like a historical fantasy echoing Hayden White’s idea of emplotment in its Romance mood.

Emplotment is the grasping together of selected events, characters, and actions into a plot line. And a plot is one among many alternative plots. A story is but one of many competing alternatives woven from a vast array of possible characterizations, plot lines, and themes. In emplotment, the plot is not just a chronology of events or the schematic of a causal chain that links events and episodes together into a narrative structure. Emplotment is also the intertextual arrangement of events within the text, and the epistemology of time and being-within-time. There are three types of mediations to accomplish emplotment. The first type is the mediation between individual events and story as a whole: a diversity of events or succession of incidents are constructed and grasped together into a meaningful story. An event has meaning in its relation to other events and incidents in the development of a plot within the meaningfulness of the whole story. Stories are more than a chronology of events in serial order because of plot, which organizes and (re)configures event networks into an intelligible whole.

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie has incorporated various stories like that of Akbar, Machiavelli, Medicis, Jodha and others into the main story dealing with the life of the hidden princess. All of these stories are interrelated and they derive meaning in their relation to other stories.

The second type is the mediation among heterogeneous factors. Factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results get emplotted and embellished. The plot (re)configures heterogeneous events and factors into a whole story and into one grand “thought,” “point,” or “theme.” Mediation allows a synthesis of the heterogeneous. The episodic dimensions of narrative are chronological while the narrative of time is not. The plot (re)configures chronological time into storied and teleological time. Emplotment grasps together configuration from mere succession. The synthesis can occur in the conclusion of a story where all the contingencies, factors, and events are given a point of view and formed into a whole understanding. Thus, emplotment gives order to the narrative.

According to Hayden White historical work is a verbal artifact. It is a narrative discourse, the content of which is as much imagined or invented as found. i.e., historical texts are literary artifacts which erase the distinction between history and story. Subjectivity is the hallmark of such a narrative. The writer has his freedom to select the events from history. He makes his own preference by giving prominence to one set of events over another. Thus, history is essentially constructed as subjective. The main ideas discussed in this novel are the interaction between historiography and fiction, the nature of identity and subjectivity, the question of reference and representation, the intertextual and ideological nature of past. The element of subjectivity is brought in through the process of narration. In the novel, the identity of Mogor dell’Amore, the narrator, is always in question. Though attributed with historical traits, he is purely a creation of Rushdie’s imagination. Thus, he is a hybrid with the qualities of both fiction and history. He considers himself, and is introduced in the novel, as the uncle of the great Mughal emperor Akbar. Though a fictional character, it is he who initiates the story.

History is a collection of theories about the past. We revise our view of the past on the basis of our present concerns. So, there is a degree of fluidity in history that is useful to the fiction writer. What is fascinating about Rushdie is his ability to make history into a fantasy. Fictionalizing facts is another way of bringing subjectivity in a narrative. On one level, *The Enchantress of Florence* is a platform for the fictionalized Akbar the Great, to ponder over the deep questions of humanity: a politically powerful man portrayed as being on the cusp of intellectual greatness as well. Fictionalizing Akbar enables the author to discuss topics which have far reaching effects on humanity.

Historicity is imposed upon certain characters in the novel. The titular enchantress Qara Koz, the story teller Mogor dell'Amore, and the mirror, maid of Qara Koz, are all such characters. In Qara Koz, the princess whom history forgot, Rushdie has created one of the most enigmatic and romantic female characters since Sheherazade. For, it is around that one strand that Rushdie has woven his entire story and has created the elaborate web which eventually snares all his characters and his readers. Through the portrayal of the fictional character Qara Koz, questions are raised on mob mentality: "Did the crowd enhance one's selfhood or erase it?" Also on the inability of the East and the West to see each other clearly: "We are their dream," Akbar's imaginary queen tells him, "and they are ours." (*The Enchantress of Florence*)

Techniques such as metafiction, magic realism, intertextuality, polyphony, parallelism, and multiple perspectives, memory palace are widely used in this novel. Texts, whether literary or non-literary, are viewed as lacking in any kind of independent fixed meaning. Every text is a mosaic of references to other texts, genres, and discourses. This is what is called intertextuality. The act of reading plunges the reader into a network of textual relations. The concept of intertextuality reminds us that each text exists in relation to others. In fact, texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers. The novel *The*

*Enchantress of Florence* explores the relation between history and narrative through an intertextual framework: the main text of history/narrative is entwined with fiction, travelogue, occult, magic, poetry, power, sexuality and politics.

Another important characteristic of *The Enchantress of Florence* is its use of polyphony. Polyphony is a feature of narrative, which includes a diversity of points of view and voices. Polyphony in the novel does not refer, as the term may suggest, to the simple co-presence of harmonizing voices. The polyphonic novel is defined by the quality of the relationship between the narrator and the character, in that the former allows the latter right to the final word. The character's voice is never ultimately submerged by that of the narrator. The novel's epic mode permits the writer to embed voices within voices, for example, character speech within narrator speech, narrator speech within authorial speech, and so on, and to orchestrate a dialogue among them.

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, there is the voice of the omniscient narrator, inside which we can hear the voices of many characters such as Mogor dell'Amore, Akbar, Machiavelli, Argalia, Qara Koz and so on. But they are never overcome by the omniscient narrative voice. It is through the voices of the characters that the story proceeds.

*The Enchantress of Florence* can be read as a metafiction which is told in story within story within story method. Metafiction is a kind of self-referential fiction which experiments with its own form as a way of creating meaning. One of the general issues of metafiction is foregrounding the fiction deflating the dichotomy of fiction and reality. For instance, fictional characters and historical figures are often juxtaposed. The major concern of historiographic metafiction is that the textuality of history inevitably produces many viewpoints and voices in histories. Novels which can be attributed to this genre, try to show that there is always more than just one way of how a historical event can be perceived and interpreted. These novels are concerned with the multiple versions of historical discourse in

order to offer an enhancement of our understanding of historical contexts and the process of their production. They are especially interested in reflexive representations of history, which results in a self-critical and self-conscious outlook in the constructions of their past. Therefore historiographic metafiction tells more than just one story. They convey different points of view. In doing so, they attempt to make the reader aware of the multiplicity of ways of interpretation. The reader is reminded that what he sees is dependent upon where he stands. Therefore an interpretation of an historical event is always subjective.

The present novel is self-reflexive as it is a story about story telling and, moreover, it deals with real historical events and figures. In the novel, the author is not just telling a story, but he tells a story about somebody telling another story. The Italian, Mogor dell'Amore, himself has a story to tell the emperor. That story constitutes more or less the entire novel. Most of the time, we forget that we are inside the inner stories. The inner story is where we hear about the character in the title: the Enchantress, the most beautiful woman anyone has ever seen or ever will see.

In this fictional world, stories and story-telling have a central role to perform. The narrator in this novel is aware that his life depends on his skill, charm, and persuasiveness as a storyteller; the yarn he spins has the effect of influencing not only the worldviews and dispositions of the emperor, his immediate audience, but also the everyday existence of every man and woman in the city. As a novel about story-telling, *The Enchantress of Florence* has a sense of self-indulgence. In many ways, *The Enchantress of Florence* is a story about the story: a metafiction that looks at the line between invention and reality and crosses it. It may seem like a magical fairy tale, but psychologically, invention is behind most of our reality. Reality is tenuous. The characters are imagined, yet given "space" and relationship. Painters disappear into their own paintings. The story-teller feels himself fading away to nothingness when kept from telling his story. Women appear as

mere echoes and mirrors of someone or something, to add to the tenuous atmosphere created by questions of identity and reality. They whisper and murmur, but they are ghosts as they glide behind curtains and veils. Rushdie shows us that story has power: the power to enthrall, the power to rend apart and the power to create. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Salman Rushdie continues to explore his interest in how the supernatural can be brought to life through the power of storytelling. He contemplates the power of the narrative to create and give meaning to life and to explore the ability of the individual to control or change the narrative. Storytellers have the most power of all people. Characters in one location or time have mirrors in another; events and phrases occur and recur, and questions of religion, identity and truth are brought in again and again. At its core, *The Enchantress of Florence* is about the power of story.

*The Enchantress of Florence* brings to the forefront the issues of history and fiction. The novel asserts the parallel between writing history and writing fiction. History and fiction are so merged together in the novel that one cannot distinguish between the two. It is a world that spans fiction and reality. The novel incorporates fictional characters along with historical figures. The problematic relation of history and fiction is explored in *The Enchantress of Florence* through its formal linking of both genres. Both historical and literary texts are products of the linguistic functions of language: and they are manifestly marked by their nature of textuality. Rushdie's novel appropriately fits into the concept of historiographic metafiction, which essentially is a metafictional work that concentrates on histories and the historical. Historiographic metafiction struggles with many of the issues postcolonialism attempts to grapple with: identity and subjectivity, reference and representation, intertextual nature of the past, ideology of the past, and the role of language. The novel challenges history and plays with the truth and lies of the historical record. It is here that postmodernism, metafiction, and postcolonialism meet to challenge the conventions

of history and fiction. The novel questions universal truths and empirical histories by emphasizing that narratives, fictional as well as historical, are subjectively constructed; they are, therefore, capable of appropriating and transforming fact and fiction.

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