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HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION: A PROCESS OF RE-WRITING

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Abstract:

The present research paper intends to define the “historiographic metafiction” as one of the postmodern forms of fiction. It is a process of re-writing history. As Hutcheon’s term suggests, historiographic metafiction is a self-conscious work of fiction concerned with the writing of history. Linda says that this kind of novel asks us to recall history and fiction. This fiction keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here-just unresolved contradiction. Historiographic metafiction shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured. It destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction. It is like postmodern painting, sculpture, and photography inscribes and only then subverts its mimetic engagement with the world. In short, historiographic metafiction demands our knowledge of that past from other texts, and other discourses.

Keywords:*Metafiction, Simulacrum, Discourse, Ontological.*

The present research paper aims to define the ‘historiographic metafiction’ as one of the postmodern forms of fiction. It is a process of re-writing history. Historiographic metafiction turns on the distinctive double relation with the reader which Hutcheon explored as, it is at once didactic, teaching us about history, and also- at the same time- allowing us the freedom to question, interpret, even ‘co-write’ its narrative. It presents its readers with history as a concept so that the fiction comes to function as a kind of theory indirectly and often directly asking us to consider our relation to history. As Hutcheon’s term suggests, historiographic metafiction is a self-conscious work of fiction concerned with the writing of history. So we can say that historiographic metafiction is fiction which uses metafictional techniques to remind us that history is a construction, not something natural that equates to ‘the past’. History is not ‘the past’, but a narrative based on documents and other material created in the past (Bran, 2009).

Linda Hutcheon suggests that there are two principal modes of narration employed in historiographic metafiction: i) multiple points of view and ii) an overly controlling narrator. Both fiction and history appear to be equally intertextual both are the implied teaching of historiographic metafiction. Linda says that this kind of novel asks us to recall history and fiction. Both are historical terms and their definitions, interrelations are historically determined and vary with time. Historiographic metafiction is a postmodern form of fiction and therefore it uses and abuses the very structures and values that it takes to task. This fiction keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here-just unresolved contradiction. This for Linda Hutcheon is a late modernist radical metafiction which attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically

and formally. It suggests that truth and falsity may indeed not be the right terms in which to discuss fiction because literature cannot be subjected to the test of truth; it is neither true nor false; this is

what defines its very status as 'fiction'. Fiction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames, frames that historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, posing both the generic contrasts of fiction and of history. The relationship between time and history is more specifically quoted by Linda as:

Past events can be altered. History gets rewritten... May be the real history of the world is changing constantly? And why? Because history is a fiction. It's a dream in the mind of humanity, forever. Striving... towards what? Towards perfection (Hutcheon, 2005).

As Warner Berthoff argues that postmodernism deliberately confuses the notion that history's problem is verification, while fiction's is veracity. Both forms of narrative are signifying systems in our culture; both; are what E.L. Doctorow in "False Documents" in *Trenner* (1983) once called modes of 'mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning'. And it is the constructed, imposed nature of that meaning that historiographic metafiction reveals. Both fiction and history are cultural sign systems, ideological constructions, whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained. It is the metafictionality of these novels that underlines Doctorow's notion that:

History is kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history... by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources that the historian suppose (Doctorow, 1983).

According to Linda, historiographic metafiction suggests the continuing relevance of such opposition between history and fiction, even if it be a problematic one. Such novels both install and then blur the line between fiction and history. Umberto Eco has claimed that there are three ways to narrate the past: the romance, the swashbuckling tale, and the historical novel. Here, Linda Hutcheon adds a fourth way of narrating the past that is- historiographic metafiction which deals with its intense self-consciousness about the way in which all is done. Linda Hutcheon defines historical fiction which is modelled on historiography and in which a notion of history motivates and operates as a shaping force. She follows Georg Lukacs' influential and more particular definitions of historical novel and simultaneously, she defines historiographic metafiction. According to her, Lukacs felt that the historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates. The protagonist therefore should be type, a synthesis of the general and particular, of "all the humanly and socially essential determinants". From this definition, it is clear that the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but proper type there are two different ways to contests this: i) they plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record, and ii) they use historical data but rarely assimilate such data.

In short, historiographic metafiction, of course, paradoxically fits both definitions: it installs totalizing order, only to contest it, by its radical provisionality, inter textuality, and often, fragmentation. Historiographic metafiction appears to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view as in D.H. Thomas's *The White Hotels* (1981) or an overtly controlling narrator as in Graham Swift's *Waterland*



(1983). In them neither do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty and of course, this not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history. The protagonist's psychic disintegration in *Waterland* reflects a shattering, but his strong narrative voice asserts that some selfhood, in a typically postmodern and paradoxical way. The very language of historiographic metafiction does not only refer to a world of history or one of fiction but it is commonly accepted that there is a radical disjunction between the basic assumptions underlying these two notions of reference because history's referents are presumed to be real; fiction's are not. Historiographic metafiction problematizes the activity of reference by refusing either to bracket the referent or to revel in it.

Historiographic metafiction like postmodern art suggests that there is no presence, no external truth which verifies or unifies but there is only self-reference, but then uses it to signal the discursive nature of all reference -both literary and historiographical. The referent is always already inscribed in the discourses of our culture. It is the texts major link with the 'world' one that acknowledges its identity as construct, rather than as simulacrum of some 'real' outside. Once again, this does not deny that the past 'real' existed; it only conditions our mode of knowledge of that past. We can know it only through its traces, its relics. In other words, a 'fact' is discourse defined; an 'event' is not.

Historiographic metafiction shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured. It destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction. It is like both historical fiction and narrative history, cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their 'facts' and of the nature of their evidence, their documents. And, obviously, the related issue is that of how those documentary sources are deployed. It suggests a distinction between 'events' and 'facts' that is one shared by many historians. Historiographic metafiction like postmodern painting, sculpture, and photography inscribes and only then subverts its mimetic engagement with the world. It does not reject it; nor does it merely accept it. But it does change irrevocably any simple notions of realism or reference by directly confronting the discourse of art with the discourse of history. Historiographic metafiction clearly acknowledges that it is a complex institutional and discourse network of elite, official, mass popular cultures that postmodernism operates in. Historiographic metafiction asks both epistemological and ontological questions. For example, how do we know the past (or the present)? what is the ontological status of that past? of its documents? of our narratives? What historiographic metafiction explicitly does is to cast doubt on the very possibility of any firm 'guarantee of meaning' however situated in discourse. Historiographic metafiction explicitly contents the presumptive power of history to abolish formalism. Its metafictional impulse prevents any suppression of its formal and fictive identity. But also reinstates the historical, in direct opposition to most arguments for the absolute autonomy of art.

Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we have to constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning and even more basically, we only know of these past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present. It's specific and general recalls of the forms and contents of history-writing work to familiarize the unfamiliar through narrative structures but is metafictional self-reflexivity works to render problematic any such familiarization. In historiographic metafiction, it is not just literature and history that form the discourses of postmodernism but everything from comic books and fairy tales to almanacs and newspaper provide historiographic metafiction with culturally significant intertexts. History as used in historiographic metafiction, for instance, never refers to any actual world, but merely to another text. In postmodern fiction, these views of history as intertextual and as extra textual- appear to co-exist and operate in tension.

This form of fiction, while teasing us with the existence of the past as real, also suggests, that there is no direct access to that real which would be unmediated by the structures of our various discourses about it. It does not deny that reality is (or was), only a construct, it just questions how we know that and how it is (or was). Historiographic metafiction demands our knowledge of that past from other texts, and other discourses. More specifically what historiographic metafiction does is reinstate the signified through its metafictional self-reflexivity about the function and process of meaning generation while at the same time not letting the referent disappear. Such postmodernist fiction, however, also refuses to allow the referent to take on any original, founding, controlling function. The facts of history as portrayed in historiographic metafiction, are overtly discursive. To sum up, historiographic metafiction does not pretend to reproduce events, but to direct us, instead, to facts, or to new directions in which to think about events.

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