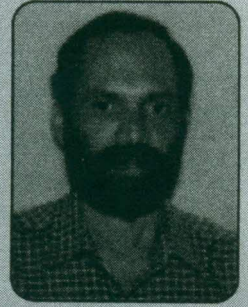


NARRATING (HI)STORY: A NEW-HISTORICIST READING OF THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE

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Postmodern historiography reveals the elements of subjectivity in historical narratives. In this perspective, the objectivity and accountability of histories are constructs of fallacies perpetuated by historians. All narratives, including histories, are subjective. Besides subjectivity, historian's mode of selection and interpretation limits the narrative potential of history. The historian's selection of events and the interpretation depends on his ideology. History is a constructed narrative and reality is only one of the elements in the narrated text. Linda Hutcheon remarks in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*: "to write history (or historical fiction) is (equally) to narrate, to re-present by means of selection and interpretation. History (like realist fiction) is made by its writer."¹ But she means that history and historical fiction are identical from the perspective of narrative strategy. Hayden White argues that historical narratives can be equated with fictional narratives. Though they come under the broad category of "story," there are many distinctions between them. M. C. Lemon also points out that "necessarily, they assume the narrative form. They narrate events."² History and Story, factual or fiction, are primarily narratives. But White remarks that all stories, including histories, are fictions. The language of the

narrative blurs the generic division between them. In this context, Arthur Marwick comments: "Language is difficult, slippery, elusive and allusive that it is far from easy to express what we mean... People... reading what we have written may well take very different meanings from what we intended."³ He means that the writer has no control over the interpretation of the text by the readers. For Marwick, "history is simply a branch of literature in which the 'narratives' of historians do not significantly differ from the novels of the novelists."⁴ But he makes a fundamental distinction between history and novel writing: "history is very different from the writing of novels, and ... is not literature in that sense of the term."⁵ The role of imagination is limited in historical narratives. In this regard, he differs from Paul Ricoeur who "insists that history is essentially the same as novel-writing."⁶ The functions of the historians fundamentally differ from those of the novelists: "The fundamental duties of historians... are very different from those of the novelists."⁷ Events of history are verifiable whereas events of the novels are not verifiable and hence need not be accurate. Novelists have a greater freedom than the historian in the choice of events, characters and locale. Still, Marwick insists that there is a close affinity between story and history: "...in many European languages the word for history is

the same as the word for story."⁸ He goes on to argue that the task of a historian is similar to that of a novelist: "historical writing in some sense tells a story; it must contain narrative, a sense of movement through time."⁹ History is essentially a literary activity which gives insights into the age in which it is written.

Dominick La Capra has made some significant contributions to the linguistic expressions of historical methods. He thinks that language helps to constitute the objects of historical statements the inferences of which are based on textual practices. He unravels the close affinity between history and art. In *History and Reading : Tocqueville, Foucault, French Studies*, LaCapra illustrates that historical problems can be represented through art, however oblique it is: "When historical issues, past contexts or particular social or political problems are discussed, the result is at times an unmodulated indirectness and allusiveness that has a suggestive role in the treatment of literature and art."¹⁰ Art and literature are rather indirect modes of narratives. A work of art, like a novel, is an artefact: it is at once artistic and cultural. Like history, it reflects the experiences and attitudes of a given people at a given period of time. This suggests that literary texts have been shaped by history. In this context, Paul Ricoeur remarks in *Time and Narrative*: "history is... a literary artefact."¹¹ This apparently non-historical semblance of history provokes LaCapra to point out the contradiction in historical practice. In *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, he remarks: "from a historical perspective, the very idea of the end of history might seem to be a non-historical absurdity."¹² He points to the contradictions between the ends and means in the textual practice of historical narratives. Hayden White also observes that a work of fiction is conditioned by history. In *Tropics of Discourse: Essays*

in *Cultural Criticism*, White remarks that a work of fiction is a metaphor of a society in time. He observes: "There are many histories, that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories, considered in purely formal terms. Viewed simply as verbal artefacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another."¹³ The writers of history and the writers of novels give their readers the same experience: an illusion of truth and reality. The readers "experience the 'fictionalization' of history as an 'explanation' for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author."¹⁴ The apparent reality of the text is due to the external world and the social consciousness shared by the author and the readers.

Writers of history and fiction make use of the same pattern to make sense of the world they depict. In making history or fiction, as White suggests, "it does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same."¹⁵ Imaginative writers like the novelists are not only concerned with the "real" but also with the hypothetical events. In this context, White observes: "Novelists might be dealing only with the imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the powers of fusing events whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the *object* of a representation is a poetic process."¹⁶ Irrespective of the fact, whether the narrated event is real or imaginary, the craft of harnessing the events into a coherent whole is a poetic art. The historians and the novelists may be interested in different kinds of events. But their narrative processes are identical. White finds some parallels in the form and objective of the fictional and historical discourses: "All written discourse is cognitive in its aims and mimetic in its means... In this

respect history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation."¹⁷ History and fiction are identical in their functions as discourses, mimetic or representative. In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, White argues that the syntactics of historical text is the same as that of a novel. He observes: "historical work as a verbal structure is in the form of a narrative prose discourse."¹⁸ History is not a direct reflection of reality; it is an aesthetic construct like a representation of reality. White keeps the narratives strictly in the field of representation and points out the difference between historical and fictional narratives in unambiguous terms: "the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his."¹⁹ This conception of the tasks of the historian and that of the novelist point to the possibility of some "inventions" in historical narratives and some "findings" in fictional narratives. In other words, a historian may fictionalize his events and a novelist may factualize his events.

There is no absolute distinction between facts and stories in narratives. White's conception of history as a narrative, a literary genre, points to the irrationality of pursuing historical knowledge as an end in itself. In this context, Mary Fulbrook remarks: "Since there is no way of assessing the past independently..., there is little point in pursuing history as a discipline dedicated to the pursuit of the truth about the past."²⁰ The question of truth arises when it is related to the reality that exists outside the text. The truth in question must be one of the elements within the text. In this regard, Edmund E. Jacobitti observes that the only way to redeem history from "knowledge" or "truth" is to recognize it as a political construct.²¹ There is no analytical flaw in representing history as a political argument. Frederic Jameson also

approves of this kind of treatment: "There is nothing that is not social or historical indeed, that everything is, in the last analysis, political."²² History as a political construct is the very conceptual framework of alternative histories. Alun Munslow also discusses the political dimension of a historical construct in *Deconstructing History*: "We impose stories on the past for a variety of reasons which are explanatory, ideological and political. Narratives are not detached vehicles for transmitting realities, nor less can historians discover the *true* narratives of the past in the evidence of human intentions and beliefs."²³ Historical narratives are not simple inferences or evidences; they are ideological and political constructs. Though historical narratives proceed from validated facts, it requires imagination to harness them in a coherent text. The writer employs strategies of selection and interpretation for this purpose. These strategies are largely ideological and political. According to Munslow, narratives explain why events happened, but they are "overlaid by the assumptions held by the historians about the forces influencing the nature of causality. They might include... individual or combined elements like race, gender, class, culture, weather, coincidence, geography, region, blundering politicians.... So, while individual statements may be true (or) false, narrative as a collection of them is more than their sum."²⁴ The elements of selection and interpretation make history a political construct.

According to White, a historical text is linguistically conditioned. The imagination of the writer puts himself among the events of the past as a novelist imagines himself as an omnipresent observer. In this regard, David Carr remarks: "Narration is the only realistic representation of the past."²⁵ Historical reality is made comprehensive through the medium of language. Frederic Jameson also endorses

his view when he states that narrative is a way by which meaning and formal coherence is given to a chaos of events.²⁶ Narrative provides a pattern, form and structure to the past events. Willie Thompson also approves this view in *Postmodernism and History*. He observes that narrative is used to construct "a coherent and ordered representation of events or developments in sequential time."²⁷ Historic authenticity is captivated in the intermediary of language. Peter Munz also expresses this conception of the narrativity of history: "Narrative is the only literary device available which will reflect the past's time structure."²⁸ The narrative form provides an objectivity to the historical events.

White's concept of history as a narrative puts forward the theory that four types of metaphor (representation), metonymy (reduction), synecdoche (integration) and irony (negation) prefigure the production of any historical narrative. When combined with particular modes of argument, plotment and commitment, they constitute the historiographical style of a writer.²⁹ The style of a historian is constituted by a certain permutation and combination of tropes. In his *Figural Realism: Studies in Mimesis Effect*, White describes history as "a verbal artefact, a product of a special kind of language use."³⁰ He believes that histories have a poetic and linguistic structure. White outlines his views on the question of realism in narrative representation, both in history and in fiction. A relativist view of historical discourse emerges from certain inherent characteristics of language.³¹ The relativity of representation is a function of the language; the events are mere objects that explain the structure of a narrative. An event can be described in several modes of writing, but there is nothing outside the order of discourse because stories are literary artefacts. Language functions as a medium that helps

to realize the truth represented in the narrative. But history as a narrative lacks self-reflexivity. This leads White to investigate the significance of "metahistory." Metahistory is a genre above and beyond history.

White argues that it is a practice to get beneath a given type of historical enquiry.³² White postulates that history is a verbal fiction similar to novels. Its contents are "as much *invented* as *found* and the forms... have more in common with their counterparts in literature."³³ White erases the distinction between literary and historical narratives: the former is generally associated with the *imagined* and the latter with the *real*. White contends that the *real* can be understood only in contrast with the *imagined*.³⁴ He does not completely reject the binary opposition, but deconstructs this dichotomy to challenge the concept of mimesis in historical narratives and questions its ontological status.

History, according to White, is a kind of archetype of realistic representation. It rests on the assumption that such a narrative has the ability to represent things as they really are. Ontologically, historical discourses are not different from literary discourses: both exist as discursive constructs. The term *histoire* as applied in contemporary fiction is used as a critical tool to analyse historical narratives. In this respect, Paul Cobley remarks in *Narrative*: "Histoire is an order of language.... Histoire is a 'historical' utterance. In *histoire* there is no intervention of the 'speaker'... into what is written.... Histoire attempts to be impersonal and, even objective."³⁵ He means that history is an impersonal and objective narrative. In this context, literary history is an artistic process. So representation and reflection become essential parts of history and literature.

Keith Jenkins, in his *Rethinking History*, argues that there is no single history;

only histories constructed by historians' perspectives. The historian employs literary narrative as a professional tool to construct a meaning for the past to tell his/her story.³⁶ He argues that facts attain significance in history when they get narrated. Lionel Gossman endorses several views postulated by White. In *Between History and Literature*, she states that there are "many points of resemblance between the discourse of historians and that of novelists."³⁷

She shows that the eighteenth century fiction and history are characterized by the distinction between story and discourse. The centre of critical interest in eighteenth century historical writing is the narrator rather than the narrative. The latter exists as a commentary to establish the relation between the narrator and the reader, and among readers. In this respect, history is not essentially different from fiction.³⁸ She also points out that nineteenth century fiction and history replace the overt narrator of the narratives of the previous century with a covert narrator. This is an attempt to reject the narrative conventions of the Enlightenment. But Dorrit Cohn contests this view. She emphasizes the historicity of the story and the discursive nature of historiography in *The Distinction of Fiction*. She proposes that "fictional narrative is unique in its potential for crafting a self-enclosed universe ruled by formal patterns that are ruled out in all other orders of discourse."³⁹ So fictional narrative is a formal pattern conditioned by the structure of a discourse. Peter Lamarque and Stein H. Olsen claim, in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*, that fiction should be determined by the mode of utterance (fictive utterance) located in a social practice rather than by an assembly of certain linguistic or stylistic features. The cultural contexts make the utterance of text as possible fiction. Fiction has distinctive features which may be absent in other

discourses. So, the reader often recognizes fiction precisely in its features.⁴⁰ These features are historically relative and changing. White argues that the methods and tools used in fiction-making and writing history are the same. Novelists and historians are both producers of texts. Historians cannot have any access to truth or reality outside the language. So the narration of an event is a form of interpretation. White contends that as a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes: "it tells us in what direction to think...and charge our thought...with emotional valences."⁴¹ The form and structure of the narrative shape the interpretation and the meaning attributed to it. So, White argues that, like the novels, historical narratives "provide a verbal image of reality."⁴² As a discourse it involves an act of interpretation. So the meaning of a specific text is derived from the narration of a story. This makes the narrative a kind of reconstruction which White calls *emplotment*. So the historical narratives are "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found."⁴³ Based on *emplotment*, there are three kinds of historical novels: documented historical novels, disguised historical novels and invented historical novels. In the first category, the novels have direct link with recorded history; in the second, there are similarities between recanted writing and story of the novels; in the third, the main characters and events are invented. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Fiction*, Hutcheon states the postmodern stand on historiographic fiction: "it controls the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation."⁴⁴ Postmodern fiction transforms past events into historical facts through the process of narration and interpretation; it "thematizes this process of turning events into facts through filtering and

interpreting of archival documents."⁴⁵ This takes place through representation. But representation is always transformation, be it in language or in image; representation stands behind the art and ideology of the author.

Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* is an *invented* historical novel in which some of the main characters and events are imagined or invented. Even the real historical events and figures have been reimaged and reconstructed so that they fit in to his narrative framework. In the conceptualization of his fictional framework, Rushdie has followed the view of Hayden White that historical narratives are literary artefacts. In this surrealist novel that oscillates between fiction and reality he reinvents the texture of life in sixteenth century Mughal India and Medici Florence. The novel is a queer web of story-telling, weaving together history and fiction, fact and fantasy. Rushdie draws in historical figures like Machiavelli, Lorenzo de Medici, Betticelli, Andrea Doria, Vlad Tepes, Elizabeth I, Akbar the Great, Abul Fazel, Birbel and others. But the narrator, Mogordell' Amore, a foreign traveler who appears in Akbar's court to tell him the story, is a completely fictional character. Though he is presented as a feigned historical figure, as the uncle of Akbar, he is purely a figure of Rushdie's imagination. Rushdie makes him narrate his story which is part of history of both Mughal India and Renaissance Italy. The narrator's confused identity points to the indeterminate nature of the narrative: the narrative merges history and fiction into an amalgam of stories. The titular enchantress, Qara Koz, is a Mughal Princess erased from history.

Qara Koz, whose name means "lady of black eyes," was the forgotten daughter of Akbar's grandfather, Baber. She was forced into exile as the companion to her elder sister,

engaged in a diplomatic match to the Persian warlord Wormwood Khan in exchange for safe passage. When Khan Shah of Persia, Baber's cousin, overthrew Khan, he offered to send the sisters back to India. But the younger princess, Qara Koz, refused to return and chose to remain as the wife of Shah. Then Baber ordered to delete her name from the annals of Mughal history. By making her the central character, Rushdie has rehabilitated the woman of strong character and individuality in history. Rushdie has presented Akbar as a curious blend of history and legend. His Rajput wife Jodha Bai is presented as a figment of the emperor's imagination, his fantasy metamorphosed. She is an object of jealousy for Akbar's other queens and she remains undefeatable with her physical non-existence.

The novel discusses serious questions related to the postmodernist perspective of historiography: the interaction between history and fiction, the relation between identity and subjectivity, the questions of reference and representation, the politics and intertextuality of the past. The historian brings in elements of subjectivity through his choice of events and figures as well as the prominence given to them through his narration. Most of the content of the novel is fictionalized and most of the characters invented or reinvented. The novelist has presented a fictionalized version of Akbar, the Great. In actual life Akbar, the greatest Mughal emperor, was a ruler with ideas ahead of his times. Though illiterate, he was gifted with a syncretic vision which he concretized in his lifetime. He established a new religion, Din-i-Ilahi, that sought to bring people of all faiths under its roof. But Rushdie's Akbar, who confronts the questions of God and Man, is a tortured, faltering, fallible man disillusioned at the failure of his dreams. Though he is a champion of religious tolerance, he is depressed with a vision of

future plagued by sectarian violence. At times, he shines as a brilliant military commander and a philosopher-king, but at other times he is given to lonely-soul-searching and apprehension about the loyalty of his sons and courtiers. The portrayal of Akbar combines the ideas related to travel and imagination, truth and deception, the East and the West, religious tolerance and reason. Akbar's Rajput queen Jodha Bai is also fictionalized. Her actual identity is contested by historians: she is never mentioned in *Akbarnama* or *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*. The emperor's real queen was Moriam-uz-Zamani, the mother of Jahangir. But it is not clear whether she was a Rajput Princess. In the novel, Akbar is perceived in relation to her. The fictionalization of Jodha Bai neutralizes the questions about her identity on the one hand and provides a fictionalized perspective to reinvent Akbar on the other.

The stories of Qara Koz, Jodha Bai and other women point to the (mis)representation of women in history. They are seldom realistic, but noted for their erotic or occult power or both. But they live under perpetual patriarchal oppression. Thus, the history of women is a history of subjugation: they occupy the little space left-out by men and remain as the shadows of men, exactly as observed by Simone de Beauvoir:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – She is the Other.⁴⁶

The enchantress is rehabilitated in the history of a world dominated by male power, both physical and political.

Emplotment is the sequencing and structuring of events, characters and action into a story. The plot is not just a chronology of events or a causal chain that links events in the narrative: it is the intertextual structuring of events within the narrated text that contrasts an epistemological structure in the unconscious of the readers. Any historical narrative is mediated through emplotment. The first type of mediation is between individual events and the history as a whole. An event has meaning in relation to other events and the meaning of the whole story. The narrative organizes and (re)configures the network of events into an intelligible story. In this novel, Rushdie has incorporated the various (hi)stories of Akbar, Machiavelli, Medicis, Jodha, into the main story of the enchantress, Qara Koz. All these (hi)stories are interrelated; they derive their meanings in relation to each other as well as in connection with the main (hi)story of the retrieved memory of the Mughal Princess. The second type is the mediation of heterogeneous factors like agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances that get emplotted and cohered into a grand thought or theme. In this novel the various subplots related to the various characters are integrated into the main plot of Qara Koz to form a unified story. The third type is the mediation of chronotopes, of space and time: it is a synthesis of the heterogeneous. The narrative (re)configures chronological time into storied and teleological time, and localized action into universal action. The narrative provides a given point of view, order and structure to the (hi)story. The narrative achieves this through emplotment.

History is a representation of the past. But the meaning of the past is constructed with reference to the present. This provides a certain degree of fluidity and flexibility to history. Rushdie's narrative oscillates between history and fantasy, making the narrative

multi-layered. The narrative interweaves the histories of Mughal India and Renaissance Florence which deal with the identical themes of power and the position of women. Rushdie's protagonist is the most enigmatic female character which has ever been created since Scheherazade. The characters perceive each other as their Other or dream, as Akbar's queen remarks: "We are their dream and they are ours."⁴⁷ It is difficult to distinguish between fact and reality as they are like warp and woof in the narrative texture. The novel explores the different layers of reality and their interactions within the fictional world of the novel and the factual world of empirical histories. The historical and magical realms of the fictional universe are inseparable. This is in conformity with the Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic: "supernatural

elements provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or in the implicit reader... [if they] are reported without being presented as such."⁴⁸ In the novel, the boundaries between dream and reality or between life and act or between story and history are blurred; there is permeability of passage between each pair. This is true of all characters, real, imagined or re-imagined. In the novel, narrative/story is an extension of life; life/art is a textual construct of history/magic. Imagination is an integral part of life. As John Fowles observes in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, people often indulge in writing fictional lives of themselves. Likewise, the narrator and the characters imagine and reimagine others in *The Enchantress of Florence*, perpetually dissolving all kinds of dichotomies.

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