



Research Paper

Interplay of Historicism and Presentism in Postmodern Historical Fiction

Suman Sunny

Post Graduate in English Literature
Kerala

ABSTRACT

In the discourse of literature and literary theory, "Presentism" could be most easily be defined as the interpretation of the texts from the past according to present-day attitudes. At the surface level this could mean the discarding of historical aspects of the past the texts deal with. This is the chief reason why presentism is not accepted well by literary critics. This paper advocates that postmodern historical fiction is one of the most suitable platforms where writers could consciously blur the boundaries of presentism and historicism. This could be easily established if the study is based upon any human traits which were in the past as well as the present. Therefore, this paper discusses the whole issue with the support of few selected short stories written by Irish-Canadian writer Emma Donoghue.

KEYWORDS: historical fiction, historicism, interplay, interplay, lies, postmodernism, presentism

Received 12 November, 2021; Revised: 25 November, 2021; Accepted 27 November, 2021 © The author(s) 2021. Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Presentism is an approach to literature which is oriented towards the text's meaning and interpretation in the present, as opposed to historicist approaches oriented to meanings in the past. The major practitioners of presentism include Terence Hawkes, Hugh Grady, and Ewan Fernie. Initially presentism emerged as a deliberate strategy to interpret Shakespeare texts in relation to current affairs and thereby to challenge the dominant trend of reading Shakespeare historically.

The whole emphasis on the specificity of a text's occurrence as proposed by Michel Foucault right from the first chapter of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), began to be seen critically by the presentists. As far as a presentist is concerned, "the past is only of interest when its concerns are seen directly related to our own, so that we scan history for what is "germane" to ourselves and discard the rest" (Barry 309). Again, it is interesting to note that from the time of its birth presentism is continuously being criticized for erasing the historical difference. "A presentist criticism's engagement with the text takes place precisely in terms of those dimensions of the modern world that most ringingly chime -perhaps as ends to its beginnings-with the events of the past" (Hawkes 22). In a way, presentism engages in the reversal of the stratagems of new historicism to some degree.

II. POSTMODERN HISTORICAL FICTION

The major argument put forward in support of presentist approach to literature of the past is that the urgent concern should be the present and not the past. "And backward-looking historicism is no position fully to exploit what difference the past can make now" (Fernie 186). The past and history are not the same. Knowing the past through history is not completely authentic. The past gives shapes to the present. But the hands which shaped the available history could definitely had made some modifications with the original past. This subjective nature of history is already under scrutiny by postmodern writers. The realist historical fiction writers aimed at making their works the realm where they could discuss the past as it had been.

The historical fiction writers of the postmodern era are rather skeptical of this objective or in other words are aware of the impossibility of the task. But the inaccessibility to the real past has not stopped them from writing fiction but has boosted their confidence. The writers of postmodern historical fiction exercise more freedom than the realist historical fiction.

Writers can refuse to tell a story or story told can be inconsistent, pointless: they can compose stories that can no longer automatically and inescapably refer to 'reality' (which can be seen as a social construction anyway), but that become self-reflexive or autoreferential: the act of narration is given special prominence or arbitrary whims of the narrator are focused on. If this becomes the centre of attention it is called metafiction. (Jarfe 385)

Some have argued that the tendency to write historiographic metafiction is a result of the influence of postmodernism resulting in the destabilization of a traditional academic history. For realist historical fiction the factuality of historical records, the integrity of the sources and historians' interpretations are seen as crucial (although questionable) in constructing a version of the past. The contemporary historical fiction authors' blur the lines between fact and fiction in the narrative, which is an example of postmodern destabilization. According to Bortolotti in his essay "The Finagling Art of Historical Fiction" (2015), "a true historical novel will offer an account of the past which purports to be true, even claiming to correct or substitute for authorized history, but which all too well aware of its own misrepresentation of the past" (111).

The selected short fiction of Emma Donoghue which is under study here belongs to the genre of historiographic metafiction. Historiographic metafiction is a term coined by Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in the late 1980s. It incorporates fiction, history, and theory. This special kind of the postmodern fiction dealing with the past is highly self-reflexive, and at the same time lays claim to historical events and personages. What is underlined in this kind of fiction is that history and fiction are human constructs. The inevitable difference between the real past and its representations is the motivation behind the historiographic metafiction. The reader is made conscious of the "fictionality" of the historical events and characters in a narrative and paradoxically aware of "its basis in real events" (Nicol 103).

All through our lives we are warned of the evils of dishonesty, yet lying remains among the most consistent characteristics of human behavior. This could be the reason why "we tend to have a romantic view of the liars, or rather of those who lie, and of how and of why they and we lie" (Dumouchel 1). The search for reality and truth is as inevitable as the existence of lies in human life. In his theory of Mimesis, Athenian philosopher Plato says that all art is mimetic by nature; art is an imitation of life. Thus, both life and art are ongoing conversations between truths and lies. These conversations take a next level in realist Historical Fiction as it demands the fiction to remain truthful to the past as far as possible. Postmodern historical fiction is not just about what had happened (based upon the subjective history) but is also about what if.

In the hands of Irish-Canadian writer Emma Donoghue historical fiction becomes not an enquiry of the truth of the past, rather, she makes use of the deception done or lies said by some women as the base around which she writes the short stories "The Last Rabbit", "Looking for Petronilla", "The Widow's Cruse", and "Daddy's Girl". She uses the "art of lying" to say about the "lying in the past", not to verify the past but to point at some truths of all time relevance. Postmodern historical fiction is arena of believability game and is a game with truths. This is exactly how these short stories illustrates postmodern historical fiction as a stage where historicism and presentism complement each other.

III. HISTORICISM AND PRESENTISM INTERMINGLED

The narrator protagonist Mrs. Toft of Donoghue's short story "The Last Rabbit" (taken from *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, published in 2002), is depicted as a naïve character. Her lies are not her own but Donoghue makes Mary's lies appear as a result of her ignorance, which in some sense is an approach to make her the victim of circumstances. Mary's inconsistent personality and ignorance are evident when she admits that "We are at home in Godalming, though some call it Godlyman, and I can't tell what is right, I say it the same way my mother said it" (Donoghue, *The Woman* 11). Donoghue has made her narrator a vulnerable character who is ready to listen to others without even thinking whether it is right or not.

By the end of the story Donoghue's narrator becomes a character who undergoes character development through her series of lies. She realizes that her own lies have put her into a predicament of becoming nothing but merely a "body" for over a month. She even ends up being confused about what the society and religion taught her. She questions the society's teachings and society's poor treatment of women. Mrs. Toft comes to the understanding that she has no other way out of the pitiful state she has put herself into. She should escape and therefore must regain the courage to confess the truth about her "pregnancy". She realizes the necessity to tell her story herself and not to allow Richard to construct one.

Donoghue collected the details of Mary Toft and her deceit from the available historical records like Dr. Cyriac Ahlers' *A Short Narrative of an Extraordinary Delivery of Rabbits* (1726) and Sir Richard Manningham's *Exact Diary of what was observed during a close attendance upon Mary Toft the pretended Rabbit Breeder* (1726). Donoghue's "The Last Rabbit" is not simply the analysis of how history treated women. In addition, it is also a critical study of how things have changed and haven't changed much. Mary Toft's lie has placed her as a deceiver in history. However, Donoghue's short story being a postmodern historical fiction is an imagination of how Toft would have been treated at present too. Of course, Toft's lie and her fake pregnancy

may possibly could have created a negative impact in her life. But she would have more voice today or she would be heard today. Or in other words Donoghue tries to show how Toft's portrayal of events would have given a different perspective to the whole issue.

In the short story "Looking for Petronilla" (*The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*), Donoghue makes evident the impossibility to imagine the past with perfection. The narrator protagonist Alice Kyteler who had lived in the fourteenth century too admits the impossibility of recounting the past as it. This is a commentary upon history, historiography and historical fiction as well. It is interesting to note that Dame Alice has no complete assurance of whether she would be able to find traces of Petronilla, the one who she is searching for in the future too. For Kyteler, "History" always becomes a cartoon, where it survives at all. One's best hope for a ride towards posterity is the bandwagon of folklore.

As for the bartender in the story, her love for history is because of her belief that it provides her some kind of feeling of completeness on knowing where you are from. For her history also serves the purpose of reminding one there is more to the whole business than one's own little life. The bartender's notion of death also becomes some sort of Donoghue's finding about truth and history. The bartender lady likes to think that no one ever really dies as long as their folks remember them. But following the bartender's thoughts Donoghue's protagonist, Alice Kyteler makes her desire to die evident. Thus, Donoghue uses the characters of the bartender and the witch to express contradicting ideas about history. For Alice Kyteler what merges her past and present is that she has not forgotten Petronilla even in almost seven centuries of exile. Thus, Donoghue has made Alice Kyteler living with seven centuries of guilt, the one who lied in the past, betrayed her faithful, the narrator of the story to make some fabulous observations about history which has all time significance.

The setting of the short story "The Widow's Cruse" (taken from the book *Astray*, published in 2012) is New York City, 1775. This turns out to be one of the short stories in which Donoghue's investigation of history bridging 'what happened' and 'what if' becomes largely explicit. Mr. Huddleston is introduced as someone who is not ready to be fooled and laughs at the news of inconvincibility of the news about some females attacking a man which appeared in *New York Weekly Journal*. He thinks that newsmen would invent any nonsense to fill an inch of paper. This could be seen as Donoghue's own commentary upon the news the journals and newspaper provide. But the whole table turns around when Mr. Huddleston ends up being deceived by Mrs. Gomez. Although a feminist writer there is no attempt from the part of Donoghue to justify Mrs. Gomez's deed or to provide a version of the past which glorifies Mrs. Gomez. Donoghue is not interested in digging up the truth of the past, rather she aims to point out the foolishness of Mr. Huddleston who found the idea of women protesting as ridiculous.

"Daddy's Girl" (*Astray*) supports the idea that past shapes today. Minnie has to live with her parents' commitment to a secret; she will never know where she came from, nor where Murray did, nor what lay behind Murray's decision to cross over the highly policed border of sex. Minnie's parents used emigration to transform themselves, as if changing place is just a cover for changing yourselves. But it is to be noted that the gender has been highly treated as a performative thing by Donoghue. Murray Hall conveniently behaved like a man all through his life in New York City. Minnie's reluctance to address her father as she supports Donoghue's stand. At the same time Donoghue uses "Daddy's Girl" to make a comment on how fluid and subjective all kinds of identities. Minnie's curiosities regarding the kind of relationship between her parents and her thoughts about the physical stature of her mother opens up queer thought in her mind. Minnie's doubts regarding what a suitable headstone over the grave of her mother is a mocking of the teachings of religion which regarded anything queer as a sin. Thus, the story gains the quality of linking the past with present by pointing out the shock people express at the deviation from the normal or general in the conventional sense. Another point of all time importance Donoghue tries to suggest is how vulnerable our conceived identities and thoughts about our self are.

Donoghue lays no emphasis on expressing the actuality of incidents. Her enquiry of the past, that is, what had happened, is largely linked to the question what if. This kind of playfulness with the idea of what had happened so as to manipulate history is what attributes distinctively postmodern shade to both *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* and *Astray*. Thus, Donoghue's endeavor is not to find the "Truth" but to create it. Her act of doing so is all the more interesting when it comes to the short stories "The Last Rabbit", "Looking for Petronilla", "The Widow's Cruse" and "Daddy's Girl" as all of them are stories revolving around treacherous events in the past.

Sometimes rereading of the past could and should shake us off our complacency and comfort zone. Revisiting the past is no easy task. If not done properly it could result in controversies. Donoghue's short stories "The Last Rabbit", "Looking for Petronilla", "The Widow's Cruse" and "Daddy's Girl" share the common feature of being stories written by keeping some sort of lies said in the past by certain people as their starting point. Whether said from the perspective of the liar or the deceived or from the both, Donoghue merges "what had happened" and "what if" effortlessly creating a new approach to historical fiction. Donoghue doesn't use historiographic metafiction to find truth about the past or to analyze the accuracy of history, but to throw light

upon the fact that how interconnected the past and the present are. Donoghue is not concerned about the inaccuracies contained in the historical records she makes use of for writing fiction. Her postmodern project celebrates the inaccuracies and conveniently effaces many conventional borderlines which distinguished history and historical fiction.

All four of the selected short stories under detailed analysis here, that is, “The Last Rabbit”, “Looking for Petronilla”, “The Widow’s Cruse” and “Daddy’s Girl” are based on some historical events inextricably connected to lies and deception. Thus, when Donoghue uses those events as the bases of her stories, the characters in the stories become either the deceivers or the deceived. The short stories are not aimed at bringing out the truth behind the past events but have the objective of identifying the postmodern multiple truths. The seamless merging of available facts about past and Donoghue’s imagination makes use of the genre of historical fiction to question the past and also to deduce some matters of all time relevance.

While “fiction” suggests “created by imagination”, there is plenty of evidence in literature that the imagination can get as close to truth as any fact-finding mission can. But it is important to realize that history is not objective truth and fiction is not opposite of truth. It is often said that writers of historical fiction employ certain tactics when they write, such as lying and manipulating. Historical fictionists misrepresent historical “fact” in an attempt to achieve a certain artistic effect: to capture the social and cultural conditions of the people in a given time, with particular attention paid to accurate contemporary details often ignored by historians. There always have been certain uncertainties regarding the use of “imaginative literature as historical evidence” (Kelly 141).

IV. CONCLUSION

Fictionalizing history is an attempt to reimagine the past so that it closely mirrors the present. Furthermore, the leap into the imagination is the same for the historian as it is for the historical fiction writer. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon claims that both history and fiction are discourses and the authors of each, by writing the past, necessarily construct it. Writers of historical fiction seek to explain “What was it like?” and therefore they manipulate empirical idea, they fabulate and may even lie.

“In the fiction of the future”, writes Raymond Federman in the 1970s, “the distinction between the real and the imaginary, between the conscious and the subconscious, between the past and the present, between truth and untruth will be abolished” (8). Certainly, in today’s post-millennial and so-called ‘post-truth’ age, the boundary between reality and fiction seems increasingly hard to distinguish. Postmodern Historical Fiction; Historiographic Metafiction in particular, is an enquiry of the past with the view point of contemporary times. This is exactly how it becomes the dais where historicism and presentism come into interplay in Postmodern Historical Fiction.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Viva Books, 2018.
- [2]. Bortolotti, Stephen. “The Finagling Art of Historical Fiction.” *Linguistic and Literary Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2015, pp. 111-119. Horizon Research Publications, doi:10.13189/lls.2015.030305.
- [3]. Donoghue, Emma. *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*. Virago Press, 2002.
- [4]. Dumouchel, Paul. “After-Truth.” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, vol. 27, 2020, pp. 1–14. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/contagion.27.2020.0001.
- [5]. Federman, R. “Surfiction – Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction.” *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, Ohio University Press, 1975
- [6]. Fernie, Ewan. “The Last Act: Presentism, Spirituality and the Politics of Hamlet.” *Spiritual Shakespeares*, Routledge, 2005.
- [7]. Hawkes, Terence. *Shakespeare in the Present*. Routledge, 2002.
- [8]. Jarfe, Gunther. “Experimental Short Fiction in Britain Since 1945.” *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008.
- [9]. Kelly, R. Gordon. “Literature and the Historian.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1974, pp. 141–159. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2712232. Nicol, Bran. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- [10]. Nicol, Bran. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.