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Challenging the Metanarrative: Raising a Toast to the Unheard Voices in the Annals of History

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Abstract:

The Merriam Webster defines history as a chronological record of significant events in the past; events that are significant or affect a nation or institution. The Oxford dictionary also defines history as a continuous, typically chronological, record of important or public events or of a particular trend or institution. However, over the centuries the thin line between history and literature was blurred with the realization that history too was a form of narrative just like the works of fiction. New Historicism helped underline the fact that literary and non-literary texts of the same period can be read parallel and the non-literary text becomes a co-text of the literary text. Hence, New Historicism is an attempt to re-read, re-invent and re-interpret history as well as the literary texts which in turn results into multiple narratives both in history as well as literature. Metanarratives, therefore, give an insight not only into the annals of history but also into the literary texts of the same periods. They also help the readers to analyze the political events shaped by the social, cultural and philosophical beliefs of the time and respond according to the present day understanding of the events in their entirety. It is time to rethink about the relations that have existed between history and literature. History that used to be the record of major events, wars fought, victories of great men, sovereigns and leaders, usually overlooked the common people— people without a face or voice. The advent of Postmodernism and its various offshoots like New Historicism, Postcolonialism etc gave these people a voice that could be heard. They too, became a part of the history-making process. Authors of historical fiction in the twentieth century plunged into the process of presenting historical events and characters from the point of view of less important characters, characters who were never the frontrunners in the events that were statistically important in the making of a nation or an institution, characters who were unheard of

till recently and characters whose opinion did not matter much in the scheme of things. Such marginal characters and their view points when presented through the vistas of history, certainly provide us with a new version probably an alternate version of history. The paper deals exclusively with such representation of historical events and characters in Michelle Moran's historical fiction *The Second Empress*. The novel deals with the epoch of Napoleon's accession to the French throne leading up to the (in)famous battle of Waterloo. The events of the period are narrated from the point of view of little known characters from the period— Napoleon's second wife, Princess of the Holy Roman Empire, Marie- Louise Habsburg and France's unwilling Second Empress; Napoleon's sister, Paulette and her Chamberlain Paul. The characters present their own account of the historical events of the continent and what we get in return is a multiple narration of events, i.e., metanarratives.

Keywords: Metanarrative, marginalization, historical fiction, New historicism, postcolonialism.

The past and present are connected in epistemology (a word stemming from the Greek 'episteme', meaning knowledge). In order to understand the past, one must use what is available in the present. And in order to understand the present, one must turn to the past.

Mark Day (*The Philosophy of History*)

Literary criticism has come a long way from the classical literary criticism of Aristotle's "art of imitation" to postmodern literary criticism of the likes of Hayden White, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and many more for whom literature is no more confined to the idea of "art for entertainment's sake" or "art for art's sake". Twentieth century writers as well as literary critics have been successful in bringing forth the thought that literature like other branches of arts is involved in the enhancement of the knowledge quotient of people. This is evident from the fact that many authors and critics are diligently involved in the process of adding something to the already existent knowledge available through a literary text or busy subverting and challenging the dogmatic assertions of grand texts and literary canons. Metanarratives or grand narratives have also been challenged in the entire scheme of things. According to John Stephens a metanarrative is

...a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience." The prefix meta means "beyond" and is here

used to mean "about," and a narrative is a story. Therefore, a metanarrative is a story *about* a story, encompassing and explaining other 'little stories' within totalizing a schema. (*New World Encyclopedia*)

The term 'Metanarrative' or 'grand narrative' or 'mater narrative' was developed by Jean-François Lyotard in his philosophical treatise *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) to mean

...a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values.

In this context, the narrative is a story that functions to legitimize power, authority, and social customs. A grand narrative or metanarrative is one that claims to explain various events in history, gives meaning by connecting disperse events and phenomena by appealing to some kind of universal knowledge or schema. (*NWE*)

Postmodernism not only allowed for a liberal and pragmatic shift in the understanding of the relative subjectivity in the meaning of literary texts, it also paved way for the acceptance of the "other view" of the monolithic dogmas. It endorsed the multiple and alternate narratives of the established narratives.

With the transition from modern to postmodern, Lyotard proposes that metanarratives should give way to 'petits récits', or more modest and "localized" narratives... Postmodernists attempt to replace metanarratives by focusing on specific local contexts as well as the diversity of human experience. They argue for the existence of a "multiplicity of theoretical standpoints" rather than grand, all-encompassing theories. (*NWE*)

The idea of multiple stand points coupled with the renewed interest in the events of history and the theory of New Historicism was avidly lapped up by the writers of late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Historical fiction emerged on the literary scene with writers like Hillary Mantle, Salman Rushdie, Phillippa Gregory and recently George Saunders winning accolades. New Historicism owns the credit of diminishing as well as blurring the fine lines between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'; between 'literary' and 'non-literary' texts.

New Historicist scholars begin their analysis of literary texts by attempting to look at other texts—both literary and non-literary—to which a literate public had access at the time of writing, and what the author of the original text himself might have read.

The purpose of this research, however, is not to derive the direct sources of a text, as the New Critics did, but to understand the relationship between a text and the political, social, and economic circumstances in which it originated. (New Historicism, *NWE*)

Some of the key concepts related to New Historicism were offered by Harold Aram Veesper in his anthology of essays, *The New Historicism* (1989). One of the most poignant aspects introduced by him includes- “literary and non-literary “texts” circulate inseparably”. (*NWE*) According to the followers of New Historicism, literary and non-literary texts must be read simultaneously for a better understanding of the text as well as of the cultural, social and economic circumstances of the author. Thus, the non-literary texts become the sub-texts of the literary texts. These concepts led to the dilution of water-tight compartmentalization of Historical discourse and fictional discourse. The sacred walls of the historical truth were pulled down giving way to the fact that history is also more or less a narrative and that the past events that history narrates to us are also constructed. It has been observed by critics that

Historians can no longer claim that their study of the past is detached and objective...The past is not something which confronts us as if it were a physical object, but is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns. (Selden, et al., 191)

This makes us rethink about the relations that exist between literature and history. History, until the middle of the twentieth century, was believed to be a specialized field of study disseminating knowledge to scholars in universities, colleges and other institutions of specialized learning. It was supposed to be monolithic, based on facts, universal and objective truth and achievements of individual genius. However, the New Historicists presented a different view of History by the third quarter of the twentieth century by terming it as “subjective” and a “cultural construct” affected by the political, scientific and religious thinking of its time. Hence, history is no longer detached and a continuous process. As per the poststructuralists, history is always narrated and is available to us in the form of “representations” which takes it closer to literature and fiction. Rather Michael de Certeau in his essay on history and fiction goes on to say that ‘fiction is the repressed other of historical discourse’. (White, 147) Also, Michael Warner phrases new historicism’s motto as, “The text is historical, and history is textual” (Guerin, et.al, 283) Thus, we see a new form of literature emerging in the postmodern era where writers not only tend to mix genres but also indulge in the inversion/ subversion of texts. Historical fiction emerged as a result of these and provided a platform for the merging of history and fiction. It subverted the earlier established historical

truths with the imaginary reality of what could have been possibly, presented from the view point of lesser known characters of history.

New Historicism has been abundantly influenced by French postmodernist Foucault and his analysis of cultural history, structures of power and ideas of “truth”.

...his visualisation of the state as ‘panoptic’ (all seeing) and all pervasive force, and his discussion of social structures in terms of power and the discursive practices that circulate its ideology through all layers of the body politic are implied in the critical readings of New Historicism. (Krishnaswamy, et.al, 84)

These ideas have revolutionized the study of literature, especially historical fiction, thus covering a range of new approaches. The canonical texts and historical doctrines are questioned and challenged from various perspectives including the poststructuralist, postcolonialist, feminist, LGBT and many more. The text is set to work against itself and tends to imply meanings which are more than one. The power structures are challenged and focus is shifted to perspectives other than that implied by the “facts”. Thus, taking a detour from what really happened to what could possibly have happened. Hayden White sums up the whole idea of relating history to fiction in the following words,

Something like this may have been what Aristotle had in mind when, instead of opposing history to poetry, he suggested their complementarity, joining both of them to philosophy in the human effort to represent, imagine and think the world in its totality, both actual and possible, both real and imagined, both known and only experienced. (White, 147)

Chapter 9 of Aristotle’s *Poetics* deals with a similar kind of analysis between the Poetic Truth and Historical Truth. Aristotle presents his view thus,

It will be clear from what I have said that it is not the poet’s function to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of thing that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary. The difference between the historian and the poet is not that the one writes in prose and the other in verse... the difference is that the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. (43)

Michelle Moran’s novel *The Second Empress* is a fine example of historical fiction following the concepts encapsulated by New Historicism. It begins with a letter from the great Napoleon Bonaparte to his brother which was seized by the British and was later published in the newspaper. This forms one of the bases of the storyline and acts as what New Historicists call the co-texts of the time. The story of the novel begins with Napoleon’s

victory over the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the Hapsburg family and the signing of the humiliating treaty of Schonbrunn. Such and many more historical facts have been sprinkled generously here and there in the entire novel, thus, merging facts and fiction in a clever historical set up with exact dates, events and characters. Moran also mentions the fact that over three million lives were already lost in the battle that led to the rise of Napoleon. She lays out the terms of the treaty as bare facts and then adds the personal comments uttered by her mouthpiece, Maria Lucia, Archduchess of Austria, the protagonist of the novel, the Second Empress.

The terms of Napoleon's treaty were harsh, demanding that we cede our city of Salzburg to Bavaria, Galicia to the Poles, East Galicia to Russia, and much of Croatia to France. So four hundred thousand citizens who speak only German, eat only German food, and know only German customs woke up to find themselves belonging to four different nations. (*TSE*, 5)

Continuing in the same vein, Moran deliberates upon the fact that the Hapsburg Emperor, Francis I, in order to make the reparation payments to Napoleon that amounted to an amount more than fifty million francs, had to change the monetary system of his empire. He had to abandon the practice of minting silver coins to adopt the new system of printing paper money. Such information comes handy to know about the socio-economic conditions of the time period. Also, it shows the meticulous reading of texts other than literary or the non-literary texts by the author in order to create the fictional account of her characters based upon factual information. The narrative continues from the point of view of Maria who reveals that the Emperor of France is looking for a bride of some European royal lineage in order that an heir could be provided to the empire. Also, that he has a disturbed family with his wife Josephine cheating on him while he was away conquering Egypt and whom he plans to divorce, his brothers who married without his consent and his favourite sister, Pauline, who has left her second husband to live the life of an unmarried woman. From this point onwards, the point of view that we have is of Napoleon's notorious sister, Pauline. The story moves further from multiple viewpoints including those of Maria Lucia, Pauline and Paulette, the Chamberlain of Napoleon's sister Pauline. Thus, Moran juggles effortlessly between various character voices and multiple viewpoints punctuating the narrative with primary sources like letters from Napoleon to his wife Josephine and other historical facts and figures and producing a marvellous piece of historical fiction.

The novel not only presents the history of a particular period but also describes the social situation of its time with the women in the French Emperor's court vying with each

other to make their place at the court. The cultural chasm that existed within the continent between two countries— on the one hand we have the outrageous, manipulating and highly immoral Pauline who practices pleasure with people of every colour, race and gender; on the other we find virtuous and sacrificing women like Maria Lucia and her stepmother Maria Ludovika who would go to any extent to protect the honour of their family. Maria is chosen by Napoleon as his wife and the decision is announced to her by her father Emperor Francis I. Maria, like all Germans, despises Napoleon calling him the Ogre of France. Yet she consents to marry him in order to save her father from humiliation and the Hapsburg-Lorraine Empire from annihilation. Women, for most part of history have been sacrificed at the altar of Honour whether they are commoners or of royal blood. Life has always been tough for women and that has been given a fair dealing by the author. Maria thinks about Napoleon's proposal and muses,

I am to marry the man who stripped our kingdom of its wealth and slaughtered more than three hundred thousand Austrian soldiers, a man whose taste for the lavish, crude, and unrefined is known throughout Europe.... I swallow my pain and try to sound grateful. (40)

When Maria is escorted to Compiègne, France by Napoleon's sister, Caroline and Pauline's Chamberlain, Paul, the first thing she has to get accustomed to is the autocratic attitude of the Emperor. He wants complete subordination and subservience from an eighteen year old bride and that includes giving up her German upbringing as well as her German name which is modified to Marie- Louise to suit the French taste. She has to dress up in French manner and when she notices her appearance in the mirror she is taken aback by the fact that the tortoise shell combs placed in her hair depict Alexander the Great. She deliberates, "They're all obsessed! With conquest and ambition." (107) Her plight is highlighted further through her conversation with her chambermaid, Collette, who dares to ask if Maria is marrying Napoleon out of her own will. Maria's denial provokes her to ask how she will ever be happy once she marries the Emperor to which she replies that she will keep herself busy in her paintings and later there will be children to keep her busy. She records Collette's expression in the following words, "She looks at me as if she's never heard of such sacrifice. But a hundred queens have done this before me, and it will have to be enough." (114)

Now begins her journey at the court of the French Emperor as also her trepidation and humiliation at the hands of the autocrat. He misses no opportunity to humiliate her whether while talking about her father and family or during their moments of intimacy. He shows no

desire to love her or treat her as his newly wedded bride. She is only a woman whom he has to impregnate before long and for this he has only one set of instructions for her the moment he enters her chamber, “Undress”. She is not only to compete, for her rights as the emperor’s wife, with the first empress, Josephine whom the Emperor is attached to despite her treacheries; but also with the Emperor’s seductress sister, Pauline, who nurtures a secret desire to rule over France by the side of her brother as an empress like the Egyptian queen Cleopatra who married her brother. Pauline is also manipulative and tries to antagonise her brother towards his new bride. Also, Maria has to face a stiff competition from Napoleon’s mother Madame Meres, who envisions her son to be the greatest emperor in history. In all this chaos, Maria finds solace in the company of Paul, the chamberlain and Hortense, the queen of Naples and the stepdaughter of Napoleon.

Occasional references to famous painters of the time like Louise Moillon, Francesco Guardi, Thomas Gainsborough and Gottlieb Schick authenticate the accounts presented by the author. Also the reference to the trade embargo impressed upon Russia which forbade them to trade with Great Britain and the crippling of Russia’s economy and their defiance of the embargo, Russia’s war against Turkey and their alliance with the French empire are also some examples that authenticate the description. The second empress gives birth to a son, the heir Napoleon longed for all the while and then it is wartime in the June of 1812 against Russia and Napoleon leaves his young wife incharge of the entire affairs of France, choosing her over his siblings. He returns after six months from a battle that has seen half a million men dead. But the emperor decides to celebrate by organising victory balls every night. Maria opines,

And so we dance. While Prussia declares war on France, courtiers fill the ballroom in their finest clothes. And when Great Britain, Russia, and Sweden all follow, we continue to waltz. There are no young men. They have all been wounded or killed in battle. (261)

Ultimately, Napoleon loses the battle against the British at Waterloo in the Netherlands and Maria returns to Vienna with her son Franz leaving behind France and her terrible past. She takes over as the Regent of Austria. The Afterword reflects the facts about Napoleon’s future after the battle.

A year after signing the Treaty of Fontainebleau, Napoleon was exiled to Saint Helena, a remote island half the size of Elba located in the Atlantic. This time only thirty people accompanied him. He arrived with more than two thousand books and spent much of his time reading plays and dictating his memoirs to General Bertrand...

He also regretted his marriage to Marie-Louise, particularly after news arrived that she was living openly with Adam Neipperg in her new Duchy of Parma. (343)

Michelle Moran also adds a Historical Note at the end of her novel that connects several factual events from history to the events depicted in her historical fiction. Undoubtedly, dates, years, place names, characters, events, all add up to give a version of the history that has been oft read but with slight variations depending upon the viewpoint of the character presenting them. *The Second Empress* is definitely a fine example of historical fiction that has the capacity to challenge the grand narratives of history called the metanarratives. Hereby, we raise a toast to all those characters who were probably silent or unheard in the annals of history.

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