



## Historiographic Metafiction: An Assessment

Sapna Dudeja

PhD Scholar (English), Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

**Abstract:**

*This paper seeks to examine the concept of historiographic metafiction as a postmodernist form that combines history with self-reflexive fiction. This genre foregrounds the Lyotardian definition of postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” and exposes the constructed nature of truth.*

**Keywords:** *historiographic metafiction, metanarratives, constructedness, self-reflexivity, postmodernism.*

Linda Hutcheon, the Canadian literary critic who coined the term historiographic metafiction in her essay “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism”, defines it as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet lay claim to historical events and personages” (245). She introduced it as an umbrella category for postmodernist forms of art and literature that combine documentary historical actuality with formalist self-reflexivity and parody. The genre is aware that history and fiction are human constructs, rethinks and reworks the past critically, works within conventions in order to subvert them, manages to connect its readers to the world outside the word and problematizes the relationship of history to reality and reality to language.

The term historiographic metafiction, (henceforth referred to as HMF), foregrounds postmodernism’s two major concerns: with history/memory and with meta-narratives. First, postmodernism challenges the notion of history as teleological, as progressive, as fact/s, as objective, as given, as a master- narrative that explains it all. According to Hutcheon, HMF’s engagement with history “is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic return.” Second, postmodernists use meta-narratives/ self-conscious/ self-reflective narratives to expose the nature of their own constructedness. Undermining the borders between historiography and fiction, HMF self-consciously explores the status and function of narrative as an ideological construct shaping history and forging identity rather than merely representing the past. It reminds the reader that history, while it exists as a continuous collective process, is accessible only as a narrative produced by human beings who remember, interpret, and represent events from a particular point of view.

HMF blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. It mixes what are considered as historical facts, events, and personages and weaves a fictitious narrative around them. It questions history’s claims to objectivity, neutrality, truth, transparency of representation. It undermines the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations. It exposes the textual nature of history and encourages the reader to ask questions like: Whose version of facts is it? What is branded as fact/s? What gets constituted as truth? What is the politics behind such a construction? Who gets included/ highlighted and who is excluded/ marginalized in the so-called historical accounts? What is the purpose served by history? Whose purpose does it serve and why? Is there a possibility to know what really happened? Is it possible to question/ subvert/ interrogate received notions of history?

HMF questions the master narrative of history and exposes it as a construct, as a discourse that is as subjective/ fabricated as a work of fiction. It informs us that all discourses are socially, culturally, politically constructed. It exposes the methods used by certain discourses to claim veracity for themselves. It does away with “history equals truth” and “fiction equals lies” kind of binary. Both are seen as signifying systems, modes of understanding the world. It shows that history itself depends on conventions of narrative, language, and ideology in order to present “facts”.

It problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge. It claims that the past is unknowable and all we have is assumptions to work with. History as we have it is not some verifiable objective truth out there. All we have is ideas of different camps, different versions of history. There is no God-eyed version of what “really happened”.

HMF also shows that our knowledge of the past is semiotically transmitted. This further problematizes the reliability of the discourse of history. Postmodernists see language as the multilayered medium within which we must search for meaning, all



the while aware of the impossibility of absolute knowledge. Meaning, as deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida insist, is a matter of contrast within linguistic contexts; it is created by difference, not by the identity of the signifier with the signified. The relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary and meaning gets constituted when one signifier connects to another signifier along the chain of signification. Meaning is constantly deferred/ postponed in the process of signification. After these developments in the domain of linguistics, it became impossible to trust language as presence, as a carrier of meaning/ truth/ reality. No discourse, be it historiography or science, is exempt from skepticism; all are regarded as human constructs and inventive creations. There is nothing absolute or eternal. All meaning, all value is historically conditioned.

HMF exposes how “the effect of the real” is created by scattering homeopathic doses of “the real” across the pages of a work. It draws attention to itself as an artifact, an artistic construct by exposing its methods of construction and textual strategies. It opens up a rift or gap between the level of text and the level of the world, dissolving their normally close interdependence and thereby impeding the reader’s progress from “word” to “world”. The object is to heighten language’s palpability or its opacity, making language a potential object of attention in its own right, independently of any world that it might happen to project. It foregrounds the materiality of the text instead of effacing it, making the author’s problematic presence “behind” the text an issue in the text itself.

This distrust of language further led to the belief that there is no single truth: there are only *truths* – multiple and subjective. Multiple versions of the story are made available, multiple endings are proposed and the reader is left free to arrive at his/her own truth. Even the narrator is deprived of authority and reliability. In struggling to narrate the past, HMF explores the problems of narratorial credibility. Traditional historiography never questions the narrator, whereas in HMF the narrator is deliberately and self-admittedly unreliable. This kind of rewriting of remembered events draws attention to the possibility of human fallibility, slips in memory etc. and challenges the reader’s perception of the past. The narrator is not omniscient, but rather far from it. Either we have multiple points of views or we have an overtly controlling narrator but in both the cases, we do not find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty.

HMF uses the strategy of causal linkages between events in order to explain certain phenomenon, the vocabulary, terminology and codes of the historical discourse in order to subvert and expose them. Legitimizing strategies of historiography like footnotes, explanatory prefaces, cross references etc are used. There is a self-conscious violation of the reader’s expectations of a reliable narrator, coherence, closure, logical linkages, and linear progressive narrative to encourage the reader to see how historical truth is constructed. The process is laid bare. The machinery is open to scrutiny. Official/ given/ documented versions, familiar facts are often contradicted by alternative readings of history. It politicizes the process of selection and interpretation and examines the ideological underpinnings/ practices/ politics that construct events as facts. This genre foregrounds the inevitability to validate any truth claims and questions the whole idea of whose truth gets told.

Hutcheon’s claim that HMF “defines postmodernism” goes too far in foregrounding the centrality of this concept to postmodernism. It is undoubtedly one of the main genres of postmodernism but not the only one to define postmodernism as such. In fact, nothing about postmodernism is uncontroversial. Whether it is a period, a movement, or a general “condition” of culture, how broadly or narrowly it is distributed around the world, when it began and whether it has ended, even whether it happened at all, are all matters of dispute. In such a scenario, such a claim sounds too simplistic, to say the least. Also, the questioning of the truth status of historiography is not confined to postmodern skepticism and relativism, but is instead a reflection of a persistent inquiry into the limits of historical knowledge that can be traced back to eighteenth century philosophical thought, to the rise of the historical novel, to the beginning of the post-colonial discourse and even before. Therefore, it is not a uniquely postmodern phenomenon in that sense.

HMF as a genre is too relativistic, playful, making the text incoherent, chaotic and unreadable. Further, since even the narrator’s voice is relativized, there seems to be a lack of serious political commitment, a firm political stand. The playfulness with textual sources, data, documents etc undermines its links to the real world, making it seem apolitical and ahistorical. One is pushed to question whether it is empty “play” or is there a serious engagement with history, politics behind it. To this charge, Hutcheon retorts by stating:

The view that postmodernism [and by implication HMF] relegates history to “the dustbin of an obsolete episteme, arguing gleefully that history does not exist except as text” (Huysen 1981, 35) is simply wrong. History is not made obsolete; it is, however, being rethought – as a human construct. And, in arguing that *history* does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and ‘gleefully’ deny that the *past* existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We can not know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidences, even its eye-witness accounts are texts. (256)



Further, she goes on to say that:

The constant complaint either that postmodernism is ahistorical or, if it uses history, that it does so in a naïve and nostalgic way, just will not stand . . . . What starts to look naïve, by contrast, is the reductive belief that any recall of the past must, by definition, be sentimental nostalgia or antiquarianism . . . [postmodernism suggests] a dialogue with the past in the light of the present . . . “the presence of the past” . . . . It does not deny the *existence* of the past; it does question whether we can ever *know* that past other than through its textualized remains. (261)

Here I would like to suggest that glorifying or critiquing an “ism”/ a genre/ a tool should not be taken too far. Ultimately it depends upon who is holding the brush. Using the same brush one could paint like a lay man or one could produce a *Monalisa*. So what one does with a certain tool, HMF for instance, depends on his/her ideology, purpose, socio-politico-economic-cultural context and so on.

Another problematic aspect of HMF is that it prioritizes the individual’s / local point of view. In such a case, the limitations of the narrator may become the limitations of the narrative. As far as the individual does not claim universal validity, it is acceptable but the moment it does so, it is highly questionable. This idea can be explicated by Rushdie’s handling of the narrative voice in *Midnight’s Children*. The double edged critique is well handled by making the narrator unreliable. In this case, the limitations of the narrator become the strength of the narrative; we laugh with and at Saleem Sinai simultaneously.

It is also interesting to note that on the one hand HMF is incredulous of the metanarrative of history, of the whole project of history and historicization, and on the other hand, in advocating a case for autohistoricization, it seems to be pilling up textual data about itself, it seems to be presenting itself as a metanarrative, the ultimate end. It posits itself as the ultimate deliverer.

To conclude, one could say that HMF is a genre that is here to stay. As a reader situated in the twenty-first century, I would be deeply uninterested in a “realist” work of literature simply because I would not be able to buy its claims to reality/ objectivity/ truth and would be able to see through the strategies aimed at achieving “the effect of the real”. The magic show loses its charm once the magician’s tricks are known to all. Also, after such a proliferation of discourses in all fields, it is only natural that one retells/ rewrites/ revisits/ recycles/ introspects/ reflects on itself, in the absence of the possibility of coming up with something drastically “new”, something that does not refer to any other work of art preceding itself.

### Works Cited

- Hutcheon, Linda. “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism”. *A Postmodern Reader*. Eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.243-72.
- . “Historiographic Metafiction: ‘the Pastime of Past Time’”. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. 105-123.
- Woods, Tim. “Postmodernism and the Literary Arts”. *Beginning Postmodernism*. Oxford: Manchester University Press, 1999. 49-68.