

**Interrogating the Historical and Fictional Aspects of the Representation of Partition in Novels: A Review of *History and Fiction: A Study of Indo-Anglian Partition Novels* by Fahmeeda Hilal**

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**Abstract**

Partition of the Indian Subcontinent as a historical event has affected the nation in many ways. India still wakes up at midnight to nightmares. The horror, bloodshed, and genocide that came by as unwanted gifts to the people of the subcontinent still drive them to traumatic fits. The severed nations have been struggling through times to come to terms with this psychic trauma. Years have worn out and the misunderstanding between nations still perpetuates. The nations have drifted away in the course of their search for answers to questions which were born the day they thought they were free. Writers have sought to answer some of the questions and perhaps, raised innumerable questions in turn. Partition literature comprises a vast body of works from writers on both sides of the border— India and Pakistan and even expatriates. Partition scholarship has been a convincing effort at understanding partition literature from myriad perspectives.

**Keywords:** Partition, Violence, Bloodshed, Disharmony, Community

Fahmeeda Hilal's *History and Fiction: A Study of Indo-Anglian Partition Novel*, is a definite and invaluable addition to the partition scholarship. In an attempt at understanding partition novels from postmodern perspective, Hilal draws heavily on the works of Michel Foucault, Paul Veyne, Dominick LaCapra, Frederic Jameson, Edward Said, Linda Hutcheon, Hayden White and so on to build up a convincing and constructive argument on the points of intersection and divergences between historical narrative and fictional narrative. Hilal undertakes a sweeping study to trace the trajectory of the development of theoretical formulations on history and fiction from the classical period to the postmodern age. She is particularly interested in the postmodernist theoretical stance that argues that the

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conventional practice of viewing historical narrative and fictional narrative as epistemologically autonomous domains is erroneous. Her penetrating study into the evolution of historical narrative and fictional narrative clearly shows that there is essentially no difference between these two types of 'discourses' to use Foucauldian terminology. She extensively relies on Hayden White and Michel Foucault to argue that the presentation of any historiographical discourse in narrative form represents an introduction of some degree of fictional quality because no set of past events has an intrinsic plot, and so in fitting any chronology into a chosen 'emplotment', the historian necessarily adds a certain amount of produced meaning. The myths surrounding history as being capable of giving the truth and objective reality have been challenged with the advent of what Linda Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction.' Hilal while studying partition novels of India, dwells upon how the novelists, writing upon a historical event engage indeliberate novelistic experimentations such as self-reflexivity, intermingling of genres and narrative forms, journalistic realism as if they are committed to telling only the truth when there is not any. The narratives of these novels very often tend to operate at multiple levels, individual, social and national. Hence there is not a single story, rather there are many narratives of the same event. This postmodernist aspect of these novels is what seems to draw Hilal's critical attention and this is the cornerstone around which her whole argument evolves, that there is no qualitative difference between historical narrative and fictional narrative. Hilal argues that narrative history and narrative fiction are human constructs. Hence no narrative can claim its validity for telling the truth because all narratives are, as Scholes and Kellogg observe, 'an unstable compound' of the fictional and empirical pressures which continually beset them. Hilal rereads into the traditional theories of history and poetry, in the light of Lukacs observation, to trace the 'invidious' tendency to make one genre 'descriptive' and the other 'inventive'. Hilal primarily relies on Michele Foucault, Lukacs and Linda Hutcheon to build up a theoretical framework within which she places the corpus of Indian Partition novels, and shows how historical and fictional narratives about partition as a historical event converge and diverge, and how difficult it is to draw a boundary line between fact and fiction, history and fiction which is why she looks at partition from both historical as well as fictional perspectives. In her Preface to the study, she makes it clear that her objective is to show and question the relationship between history and fiction, and to pinpoint the qualities that distinguish narrative historiography from narrative fiction. The division of chapters according to the thrust areas of arguments lends a definite structure to the book. Prof. A. H. Tak's simple and succinct foreword surely excites one's interest to read on.

In chapter 1 entitled History and Fiction: Similarities and Dissimilarities, Hilal attempts to build up a conceptual framework for her study by tracing the evolution of the concepts centering around the relationship between history and fiction from Aristotle to the postmodern period. This chapter draws on the theorisations of historical and fictional

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narratives by a number of historians, critics, novelists and narrativist philosophers. Hilal takes particular interest in the postmodern critics' rereading into the conventional ways of looking at history and fiction as two distinctly separate narrative domains. The age old practice of privileging one narrative over the other as more authentic and capable of giving the truth and objective reality comes to be challenged by historians as well as literary theoreticians in the postmodern age. Hayden white undertakes a strategic rereading into historical narratives that claim to consist of facts not of fiction and attempts to locate fictive structures which, according to him, have always been part of historical writings. White argues that the arrangement of historical facts and incidents into a coherent chronological narrative requires the historian to introduce certain fictitious elements without which the scattered, disjointed historical events and incidents would remain meaningless. Hence historical narratives are essentially human constructs and fiction is an inseparable presence there. Hilal in the first chapter shows how White's strategy of finding fictive structures in the historical writing is paralleled by Linda Hutcheon's attempt at exploring a new genre which she labels as "historiographic metafiction" in the domain of theoretical studies of literature. Hutcheon uses the term to designate the vast body of postmodern narrative fictions that are intensely self-reflexive, and which also interrogate the conventional practice of compartmentalisation between historical fact and fiction. In the light of Hutcheon's reading of postmodern narrative fiction, Hilal argues that novels such as *Midnight's Children*, *Ragtime*, *Public Burning*, *1876*, *Legs*, *G.*, *Famous Last Words* and so on refute the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claims to truth from that identity. In this chapter, Fahmeeda Hilal traces the origin, growth and development of the historical novel, from Scott onwards, in order to scrutinise the relationship between 'historical novel' and 'historiographic metafiction' on the one hand, and 'historical novel' and 'narrative history' on the other.

According to Hilal, Historiography as a narrative has a long history of evolution through ages from the classical period. She argues that the Renaissance historiography marks a departure from the simple annals of the medieval period. History in the Renaissance came to be recognised as a continuous, selective and integrated narrative, distinguished from mere records of facts, such as annals, as well as from poetry which was regarded as 'an art of imitation'. Truth was universally reckoned the objective of the historian, and impartiality the most important of his virtues which primarily differentiates him from poets. Hilal observes, the modern concept of history as an imposition of form upon the past owes its origin to the development of the Renaissance historiography. She makes extensive references to historians and creative writers from the classical period to the postmodern period in order to show how historical narrative and fictional narrative attempt to retell the stories of the past, and in doing so these two forms of narrative tend to cross the generic boundaries. Historical narrative

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pretending to tell the truth takes recourse to fiction and fictional narrative pretending to tell unreal stories tends to comment, recreate and reshape historical past in ways different from the former. Hilal argues that historical theorists from Bayle to Voltaire and De Mably have recognised the inevitability of a recourse to fictive techniques in the representation of real events in the historical discourse. Hence, according to Hilal, historians such as Hume, Gibbon, Robertson, Voltaire and so on were not content with mere compilation of annals and chronicles but tried “to infuse into history the *esprit Philosophique*, to narrate in such a manner as to give the reader a background experience profitable for reflection on human nature and destiny.” On the other hand, the historical novels of Walter Scott, which had their antecedents in *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*, *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*, mixed history and fiction in a way never done before. Writers such as Tolstoy, Balzac, and Charles Dickens added new dimensions to the fictional treatment of history.

Hilal further observes that the modernist novels mark a distinct departure in the way fiction attempted to narrate history. Writers like Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Gide, Joyce, and Woolf were not concerned with narrating social or political history, rather history, for them, meant an attempt at inscribing the psychic reality of individuals because objective truth and reality have no existence if there is no agent to perceive and conceive it subjectively. Hilal also points out to the collapse of generic boundaries in the postmodern period. Hence, the age old idea of autonomy between history and fiction has ceased to exist. The postmodern historians, literary critics, novelists and narrativist philosophers are more interested in exploring the ways in which history and fiction as narrative discourses have been overlapping and intersecting each other over the ages. Literary critics and historians such as John Lukacs, Raymond Williams, Northrop Fry, Hayden White Linda Hutcheon and so on are interested in the complex process of interaction between historical and narrative fiction. Hilal refers to the novels such as Anthony Burgess’ *Earthly Powers*, D. M. Thomas’ *The White Hotel*, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night*, E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* and Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln*, in which there is a conscious and deliberate attempt on the part of the novelists to mix real with imagined history in a curious manner. Hilal argues these postmodern novels or what Hutcheon calls ‘historiographic metafiction’ raise the same issues about narrative conventions in fiction as the works of White, Paul Veyne, Dominick LaCapra, Jameson and Edward Said have raised about historical discourse and its relation to the literary: issues such as those of narrative form, of intertextuality, of strategies of representation, of the role of language, and the relation between historical fact and its narration. Thus, according to Hilal, the postmodern writings on history and fiction articulate that both historical narrative and fictional narrative are signifying systems across cultures: both are cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained. Before moving on to the second chapter, Hilal states that her prime focus of this

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study would be to situate the Indian Partition novels within the postmodern theoretical framework that she has built up in the first chapter and to explore how these novels are similar to and different from historiographic metafiction.

In the second chapter which is the smallest chapter of the book, Fahmeed Hilal takes a quick look at partition from a historical perspective. She elaborates on the major events and incidents that led to the partition of India into two sovereign states – India and Pakistan. She also reads into the select historical narratives of major historians about the horror, bloodshed, and mass-massacreathat came with partition. She reads into the historical narratives in the light of post modern historiography. Hilal at the very outset of the chapter argues that partition of India was the culmination of ‘divide and rule’ policy of the Britishers which was at the very heart of their administrative strategy of domination and control. She points out to the problems of arriving at a conclusion after going through the historical narratives given by different individual historians or different groups of historians. She argues that a careful study of the popular established historical narratives raises more questions than it solves since each narrative tends to be ideologically biased. On reading the narratives of partition, according to Hilal, one is beset by many questions. She observes the conventional historical narratives fail to answer questions such as why the British paramountcy did transfer power to two dominions instead of one, what made Hindus and Muslims who fought for freedom together into two rival forces, and the biggest of all questions, who were responsible for partition. Hence the conventional concept of historical narrative as narration of truth and objective reality is rendered invalid. Hilal argues that all historical narratives about the partition of India are characterised by what Hayden White calls ‘emplotment’, a strategy adopted by all historians to impose a new subjective order on to the actual order in which the historical incidents take place, in order to produce meaning. Much like a story teller, a historian may attempt at reversal, subversion and disruption of the actual order of the historical incidents which is why one single historical incident gives birth to multiple historical narratives from multiple perspectives. For instance, Hilal observes, the Indian historians mostly blame the Muslim League leadership, particularly M.A. Jinnah, whereas the Pro-Pak historians accuse the influential Indian statesmen like Gandhiji and Nehru; and all of them collectively hold the British policy of ‘divide and rule’ responsible for the partition. Hence Hilal infers that, to reach a definite conclusion as to who is to be blamed for partition is a difficult task because the interpretations that the historical narratives provide are in the words of White not ‘transparent’, ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ but are clouded with personal traumas, individual shortcomings and psychological evasiveness. Thus she considers all historical narratives about partition run the risk of being personal reconstructions, subjective readings and arrangements of events. Hilal reads into the historical narratives about partition of select historians such as Ispahani, Nanda, Aziz and Hudson who, according to her, like partition novelists such as Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Malgonkar, Attia Hossain, Bapsi

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Sidhwa, Salman Rushdie, configure a narrative structure so as to give meaning and order to the host of scattered, disjointed incidents that led to partition.

In chapter 3 which constitutes the cardinal points of her arguments, Hilal attempts to understand partition as a historical event from fictional perspective. Hilal reads into a number of partition narrative fictions to explore how they reshape and recreate the historical world within the scope of the narratives. In the course of analysis, she also attempts at categorising the partition novels to relate them to European historical novels, and she also tries to fit the novels into the category of postmodern historiographic metafiction. She has an objection to calling these novels such as Ahamad Abbas' *Inquilab*, *The world is My Village*, Malgonkar's *Distant Drum*, R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for Mahatma*, partition novels since they make only a passing reference to the partition, and she argues that in these novels the historical setting is so unimportant that with few changes in the background the novels could have been set in any other time of the Indian history. The partition narrative fictions which Hilal takes up for elaborate study are *Train to Pakistan*, *The Dark Dancer*, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, *A Bend in the Ganges*, *The Rape*, *Azadi*, *Twice Born Twice Dead*, *Midnight's Children* and *Ice-Candy Man*. In her study of *Train to Pakistan*, Hilal seems not to be interested in investigating into how faithfully the novel does narrate partition as a historical event, rather she is interested in exploring various aspects of novelistic experimentations of Kushwant Singh who deliberately mixes history, romance and journalistic realism in an ironic way which is to be found in postmodern historical novels such as Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, and E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*. According to Hilal, the deliberate intermixing of public and historical with private and individual is an artistic resistance against the claim of the so called autonomy of historical narrative and fictional narrative. Her study of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hossain shows how Hossain intersperses personal and national history simultaneously within the narrative. She compares Hossain's narrative strategies with that of E.L. Doctorow's and Salman Rushdie's. Hilal argues that the two themes of the novel, the one dealing with the personal and social life and culture of the Muslim family, and the other with the political life of the nation, run independently of each other in the beginning, but in the end they get so closely interconnected that the national political catastrophe leads to the domestic social catastrophe. She observes the characters in the novel present different historical versions of partition. However, as Hilal thinks, in spite of its having some features of historiographic metafiction, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, primarily follows the traditional historical novels in the presentation of the historical movements and events of the pre-partition and post-partition times. In *Azadi*, Hilal argues, Chaman Nahal, for whom history is a "myth" or "metaphor" invents almost a new 'genre' in the history of Indian fiction by merging fact and fiction, history and novel, autobiography and romance within the narrative scope of the novel. She labels the novel as "a documented historical novel" in which, as Turner observes, "the conventional distinction between history

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and fiction threatens to collapse for the novelist.’’ Hilal argues Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* marks a radical departure from conventional partition narrative fiction. For her Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* like Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* tends to define national history through personal history. Rushdie rereads into the conventional historical narrative of partition by incorporating multiple narratives of the same event. He busts the myth of historical truth by deliberately relying on his characters’ memory. Rushdie’s mixing of fact and fiction, memory and myths is a postmodernist resistance against the monolithic narrative of historical truth. According to Hilal, the two partition novels, *Midnight’s Children* and *The Ice-Candy Man* written after the 1980s follow the trends and techniques of the postmodern historical novels of the west like *Ragtime*, *The book of Daniel*, *The Public Burning*, 1876 and so on – novels which are categorised by an intermingling of genres, overlapping the territory of history and fiction.

In chapter 4 Hilal attempts to draw a conclusion to the study by pointing out that there still exists a thin border line between fictional narrative and historical narrative. She also dwells upon the dangers of undertaking a comparative study of Indian partition narrative fiction and western postmodern historiographic metafiction. She opines that, although, partition novels in India published before 1980s may find some parallel examples in the west, they can never be studied in opposition to each other since the narrative modes and strategies of the novelists on both sides are remarkably irreconcilable. Excluding a few exceptions such as *Midnight’s Children* and *The Ice-Candy Man*, the Indian partition novels, Hilal argues, differ from postmodern historical novels in several ways. According to her, the postmodern novels such as *The Book of Daniel* and *The Public Burning* are invented memoirs of the historical episode of the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs, but *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi* are personal memoirs of the respective novelists. She thinks, unlike Anglo-American postmodern writers of historical novels, Indian partition novelists do not attempt at an absolute blurring of the line between history and fiction in order to establish that there is no absolute qualitative difference between narrative history and narrative fiction. At the end of the study Hilal draws on Matt. F. Oja to distinguish narrative fiction from narrative history. One such distinction is that, while history is characterised by literal historical truth which can be verified by objective and empirical means, fiction is characterised by non-literal historical truth and the degree to which a given set of events, including human actions and emotions are consistent with what one knows about individuals and society in a specific historical context which can hardly be verified empirically.

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