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A Metahistorical study of Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* (1998).

Abstract

This research aims at studying Kamila Shamsie's novel, In the City by the Sea (1998) using the theoretical framework of historiography by Hayden White and historical fiction by Richard Slotkin. In the City by the Sea portrays one of the most significant periods in the political history of Pakistan. According to White and Slotkin's critique on historiography and historical fiction, both have the same purpose of presenting the events of past to the audience of present. With both forms different to each other, these forms use technique of narrative to tell the story. This research paper purports that historical fiction is more useful method in the present age as compared to history. History just presents events of the past, historical fiction on the other hand presents us with a critique of past using the imaginative and creative way. It urges us to learn through the mistakes of the past to make future better. Another important element that is missing in history books is the element of hope that the historical fiction brings with it. This study will further employ critiques from multiple theorists including Foucault, Guilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to affirm the presented argument.

Key words: History, fiction, Shamsie, Past.

Introduction

We live in a post-modern world which challenges the totality of truth and meaning. Truth and meaning, in postmodernist societies are like fluids, which are ever changing. They both are social constructs and change with person to person. In present day society narratives and beliefs are constantly being challenged and redefined. Every field of knowledge is being challenged. History is not free from the critical debates of post modernism. History according to postmodern theorists is historian's version of events of past and it is not free from the subjectivity of the historian. Importance of history in present times have increased. Its significance in a post-colonial society like Pakistan cannot be negated. Shashi Tharoor, an Indian historian answers the questions raised at the necessity of understanding of history in human life. According to him, one doesn't need to know the history to release his country from its responsibility to take things to the right end, but to learn from the mistakes that were committed in the past and bring us to the present reality and to know history for history's sake.

This research is aimed at providing the suitable evidence in favor of the idea that historical fiction is more productive as compared to history in learning about the past and forming the narratives. For that purpose, this study employs Richard Slotkin's theory of Historical Fiction and Hayden White's theory of Historiography. Kamila Shamsie's novel *In the City by the Sea* will be studied using the theoretical framework provided by the two theorists. This study purports that it is a historical fiction. It portrays a significant period in the political history of Pakistan. Richard Slotkin talks about the restricted approach of historical writing and claims that fiction provides ample opportunity to read and analyze past in creative and imaginative way (which is restricted in historical writing.) History and historical fiction both provide its readers with an account of past but the imaginative element of fiction places it above the historical texts in engaging the reader and acquiring his attention. As far as the reliability of the historical fiction is concerned, Slotkin believes that it can be equally reliable to history book if it is written after research and careful analysis of the events of past.

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Hayden White believes that there are great amount of similarities between history writing and fiction with history's dependence over narrative for meaning being the most significant. That dependence over narrative excludes the chances of objective or truly scientific history. He also believes that use of narrative makes history most victorious because that's when history becomes full of meaning.

Historical fiction is the fiction about the past happenings to give readers the awareness of those facts which have been deliberately neglected by the history itself. Historical accounts can be biased reflecting the biasedness of the historian. History itself is contaminated with the fact of being forcefully written by some powerful elites to propagate the agenda of strengthening the self-created hence universally objective binary oppositions. In order to understand historical fiction, one must have an understanding of history. In his research article "Fiction for the Purposes of History", Richard Slotkin describes that how history serves a purpose of fiction in depiction of the past:

History is what it is, but it is also what we make of it. What we call 'history' is not a thing, an object of study, but a story we choose to tell about things. Events undoubtedly occur: the Declaration of Independence was signed on 4 July 1776, yesterday it rained, Napoleon was short, and I had a nice lunch. But to be construed as 'history' such facts must be selected and arranged on some sort of plan, made to resolve some sort of question which can only be asked subjectively and from a position of hindsight. Thus all history writing requires a fictive or imaginary representation of the past. There is no reason why, in principle, a novel may not have a research basis as good or better than that of a scholarly history; and no reason why, in principle, a novelist's portrayal of a past may not be truer and more accurate than that produced by a scholarly historian (Slotkin, 2005: 222).

Furthermore, he explains the insufficiency of historical writing and how it leads to the development of genre of historical fiction:

Novels arise from the shortcomings of history.' I take this remark by the nineteenth-century German romantic writer Novalis in a triple sense: as a criticism of the limits of history writing as a discipline; and as an observation about the inadequacies of historical experience itself. It is also a precise description of why I started writing historical fiction (Slotkin, 2005: 221-222).

Hayden White, a famous critic and theorist of historiography, in his book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973) explains historical texts as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (White, 1973: 9). He finds historical works as to "combine a certain amount of "data," theoretical concepts for "explaining" these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past" (White, 1973: 9). He describes what kind of questions historians attempt to answer in historical writings: "these questions are of the sort: "What happened next?" "How did that happen?" "Why did things happen this way rather than that?" "How did it all come out in the end?" These questions determine the narrative tactics the historians must use in the construction of his story" (White, 1973: 7).

It would seem unjust to the emerging genre of historical fiction if critics assert that historical text is depiction of the past as it actually is while historical fiction is not. Historical writing itself is a recount of events of the past from someone's perception rather than as it is. It is impossible to explain history accurately without any variations. If one reads carefully, historical texts reflect prejudices and partiality of historians when they narrate and explain any event that happened in the past. Richard Slotkin describes the precision of historical novels in given lines:

A novel can be as accurate as a history in telling what happened, when and how. It can, and should, be based on the same kind of research and rigorous analysis of evidence. But the distinction and advantage of the fictional form lie in the way it uses evidence and represents conclusions. The truth the novel seeks is poetic rather than historiographical: it sacrifices fidelity to non-essential facts in order to create in the reader a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts—and also a sense of what those facts mean in some larger sense—and to achieve that in a flash of recognition, rather than as the conclusion to a necessarily laborious argument. Implicit in this process is an alternative approach to the theoretical work of the discipline (Slotkin, 2005: 225-226).

The above mentioned route shows that both genres have the common purpose of narrating history as accurately as possible. Additionally, Slotkin in the same articles describes that historical fiction can be utilized as a medium to draw attention of people towards historical studies:

The argument made most frequently on behalf of historical fiction is that, if responsibly done, it can be an effective instrument of popular education; or at least a means for stimulating interest in the study of history. Most practicing historians I know were first attracted to their subjects by reading historical fiction. I'd like to offer a stronger argument. If properly understood, the writing of historical fiction can be a valuable adjunct to the work of historians in their discipline (Slotkin, 2005: 222).

Moreover, he explains the common features and mutual purpose of history and fiction. He writes:

Historians like to associate their field with the social sciences, but in fact, the discipline is more like novel writing. Ask an economist or sociologist for an explanation and you get statistics, axioms, and equations which account for behavior with mathematical elegance. Ask a historian and what you get is a story, an account of experience that is most valid when least elegant: because it must account for those many elements which are at play in every human event, but are not mathematically necessary to produce the outcome—indeterminacies, over determinacies, excesses, misjudgments, divagations, misunderstandings, outrageous coincidences, craziness, wasted motion, emotional outbursts, unfathomable errors of judgment, random acts of kindness, irrational malice (Slotkin, 2005: 222).

In his article "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality", Hayden White claims that creativity and art along with facts is a necessary requirement of narrating the past. The problem with historical writing is that it has been particularly ineffective in its endeavor to achieve the 19th century expectations from historical writing to develop into a kind of science that it aspired to be.

Slotkin is of the opinion that a novel imaginatively retrieves the diminished events of the past, the structure of the novel allows writers and readers to analyze the other alternative probabilities for beliefs, actions, political and social changes which took place in the past and cannot be attained creatively in historical writings. He states that if historical novels are written sensibly and cautiously, they can become the most useful, favorable and potent medium of understanding the knowledge of the past, or at least they can lead into engaging more people in studying history which is called as historiography. Historical novels seek aesthetic and creative symbols, contrary to historiography which provides a boring and monotonous recount of the history which is also in the form of a narrative. The variation and advantage of the historical novel lies in the way it utilizes evidences and presents the conclusion. Moreover, he explains that historical fiction has to amalgamate in it the process of formulating knowledge in its depiction, portraying lives of characters in a way that how an individual experiences the whole event __ necessarily engaging with the struggles and the outcomes which seem most significant at the same time.

White asserts that all tales are actually fiction. Historical writing is also the tales and accounts of history so it is hard to say that it is superior as compared to historical fiction. Both genres serve a common purpose to history and readers. White states the objectives of history and fiction: "It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding," "identifying," or "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between 'history' and "fiction" resides in the fact that historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his" (White, 1973: 6). Nonetheless, historical fiction makes history understandable in a plain and better manner: "Historians in general, however critical they are of their sources, tend to be naïve storytellers" (White, 1973: 8).

Literature review:

R Premlatha and Sumathy K. Swamy in their research article titled "Psychosocial analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea*" studies the psychological and social factors influencing the lives of characters, their behavior and their ability to function. Hassan, a boy of 11 years of age experiences the death of his neighbor child and it becomes difficult for him to come to terms to the reality that he saw. Living in a dictatorial regime with his maternal uncle in house arrest and later being arrested, Shamsie presents how the psychological and social factors influence the development in character of an eleven year old.

Shehryar, Hassan's father who is a lawyer can be seen advocating the flexibility in attitudes towards the dictatorial regime. For him continuation of life is more important than political position or keeping up with ones political views. His ideas reflects his social position where he is responsible for the safeguard and wellbeing of his family, which ultimately reflects in his psyche. Salman on the other hand is complete opposite to Shehryar. Salman

being the flag bearer of a political party against the dictatorial rule demands a strong will power of him. His societal position demands the sacrifice which he has prepared himself for. Study of other minor characters show the overall psyche of the individuals during dictatorial era. A collective psyche is developed among the individuals that is based on fear and intimidation. Every character reacts to that certain psyche according to their certain social positions.

Sauleha Kamal in her book review "Pakistani English Novel's Ceaseless Quest for Identity" talks about the issue of identity in Pakistani English novel: "Since the country's inception in 1947, however, it has not only been faced with the task of defining its distinct postcolonial identity that is different from a postcolonial Indian identity, it also has had to separate its new identity from its Indian past" (Kamal). Pakistan and India both got independence from British colonial rule, and a new post-colonial identity was formed but in case of Pakistan, it was a bit different in the sense that they had to construct their post-colonial identity different from Indian post-colonial identity leaving the Indian past and different from the Muslims of India. She writes: "Born at a moment of intense trauma, caused by Partition, and amid a heightened sense of nationalism subsequently, Pakistani English fiction began its life with no lineage — or so it seems" (Kamal). Without any past Pakistani English novel started its journey. Cultural assimilation and other debates are important in the context of post-colonial novel but in Pakistani context the distinct identity became the main subject matter in Pakistani English fiction. Ayesha Jalal writing in a chapter titled 'The Past as Present' in *Pakistan: Beyond the Crises "State"*, published in 2011 identifies the struggle for Pakistan as the one to "define an identity that is both national and Islamic"

A central theme of Kamila Shamsie's novels is the emotional discomfort that results from leaving the security of the past, a past represented by home, family, friendships and Karachi. Kamila Shamsie associates nostalgia with Karachi, her sense of belonging to the city is evident through her texts. In her first four novels the central character faces loss of family or friends; such loss is either the result of public events or the indirect influence of the political on the personal. Sense of loss both of home and loved ones as a dominant theme is there in Shamsie's novels. There are certain symbols that are present in most of her texts. Autobiographical element in her novels cannot be neglected. Her association to Karachi, Sea, and the domestic life that she presents in her novel reflects the autobiographical element in her novels. Up till now, Shamsie's novels have been analyzed using the various theoretical frameworks, approaches and techniques. History, politics, nostalgia and identity are the issues that are most frequently studied by critics in her works. However, no scholarly research has yet been undertaken on the historiographical elements in her novels. Thus, this research will prove to be an authentic contribution and extend scholarship on Pakistani fiction.

Research Questions

- What is the significance of historical fiction and why is it needed when history is there in the first place?
- How does the novel justify itself to be a work of historical fiction?

Theoretical Framework

This Research employs the theories of two renowned theorists of Historical Fiction and Historiography, Richard Slotkin, and Hayden White. Richard Slotkin is a historian and a cultural critic. He himself writes historical novels along with his historical research. He utilizes his historical novels to prove his research on historical studies and his claims about historical novels. This unique aspect of his own historical novels validates and makes his research on historiography and historical fiction stands out among other theorists. He explains that a novel is more useful for readers to explore the history in a creative and aesthetic way which is limited in historical texts. While both genres are the narrations of past, the metaphorical language, symbols, other literary devices, characters and plot of novel draws attention of readers towards the history more than historical books. He is acquainted with many historians who turned towards history writing with the help of historical fiction. He claims that historical fiction can be as genuine and accurate as any history book while narrating the history if it is written after detailed research and careful study of all the existing proofs.

Hayden White's theory of historiography and historical fiction will be employed to discuss the significance of historical novels. He was a famous American historian and an influential critic, famous for his research on historiography and historical fiction. This study is important because it addresses the emerging genre of historical fiction which has become a universal debate for historians and fictional writers around the globe. It addresses why it's significant and why it emerged when history was already present in the first place. He claims that historical writings are inspired by fictional writings in more than one ways; the greatest one is its reliance on the narrative technique and plot construction to give meaning to the historical event which it attempts to portray. Therefore, it

reduces the chances of "objective or truly scientific history". Additionally, he claims that history can be portrayed best when it employs narrative technique along with use of literary devices because it allows history to be full of meaning and creativity. He is of the opinion that all narratives are result of imagination and fiction.

Discussion and Analysis

Shamsie uses the child narrator just like Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* to discuss the bitter realities of time in a more objective way. Though novel is written in 3rd person narrative with an omnipresent narrator, readers get to know the information through an eleven year olds' perspective. Hassan, an eleven year's old boy is the protagonist of the novel who tries to rescue his uncle Salman Haq from his possible death by the military ruler. Beauty of the novel lies in the use of certain new and imaginative techniques that present events of past in very different manner. Child's perspective is one of the many imaginative techniques that Shamsie has used in her novel. Through child's perspective readers get to know about the events of the past in more authentic way without any refining of facts and information.

An overall atmosphere of fear and intimidation is portrayed in the novel. Characters are not allowed to carry on the very trivial matters of their lives. Salman Haq, an opposition party politician is kept in a house arrest, and is disconnected to the life outside the boundary line of his house. "Aba rolled down the car window and passed a letter to the seated army guard. 'For you,' he said. 'From the president,' he saluted. . . . 'Please,' Ammi said. 'He's my brother. Let us in'" (Shamsie, 1998: 11). These lines from the text illustrate the amount of involvement of army in the lives of civilians during the dictatorial rule. Fear is not limited to the lives of a specific class or group of people, it is normalized in military regime and everyone is affected by it, "that night, in the stillness of the bedroom, Hassan felt as though he was surrounded. People in uniform watching him, listening to every breath, wondering why he was not asleep" (Shamsie, 1998: 19). This shows the effect of dictatorial rule on children.

There are moments, Hassan, when I like to think that the stars are bullet-holes. For every bullet shot by an oppressor there springs to life a star, with so great a radiance that it can never be put out, it can never be imprisoned. But if that really was true, the last three months in the city would have erased every trace of blackness from the sky. (Shamsie, 1998: 22)

These lines show the effect of dictatorial rule on the people. Even the daily life metaphors that they use are not free from the intimidation and fear circulated by the dictator. Another important thing to note in the text is the child characters. The fact that readers get to know the story through the 11 years old boy is not co-incidental. Shamsie deliberately places an 11 years old boy as her protagonist. A boy of Hassan's age dies at the start of the novel, named Azeem. Children are also participating in the strikes and rallies against the government: "This is not a time for studying. This is a time for unity, 'a boy Hassan's age shouted. And another voice: 'close your school. Tell your students to join our rally'" (Shamsie, 1998: 27). This quote suggests the effect of dictatorial rule on children. Children it appears are taken as a metaphor for the future of the country. By portraying children in diverse conditions, away from their studies Shamsie wants to say that these dictatorial regimes effect on country is long lasting and not just the present but future is also in danger. The narrative that she adopts in the novel opens up to different interpretations, which make the fiction more interesting and easy to digest.

The notion of being surrounded and continuously being under the surveillance is present in the novel. The people who are against the dictatorial rule, whatever they do or say it ultimately reaches to the people in rule: "look, do me a favor – when you finish this conversation and repeat its details to your brother's future in-laws ask him if he'll tell my guards to stop harassing Zahoor about the quantities of hair-oil he buys us from the market each week" (Shamsie, 1998: 18). These lines imply the state's involvement in his life that even his calls and conversations are not confidential every detail is being provided to the authorities: "It's meatless day. No flesh or fowl available, except the frozen variety which, of course, Imran refuses to cook" (Shamsie, 1998: 52). The novel is also a satire on the lives of rulers. It indicate the meatless days that were introduced to minimize the meat consumption in the society. As rulers believe that consuming meat is directly proportional to human desires so by minimizing the meat consumption they can minimize the lust and desire of humans. But it ultimately resulted in people buying triple the quantity of meat the day before the meatless days: "In the stunning climax of a serial that was almost cancelled because the villain looked remarkably like the president, (the villain shaved his Presidential moustache and the show was allowed to go on, largely because the president was as big a fan of it as anyone)" (Shamsie, 1998: 48). These lines are satire on the character of the President. Satire and different narrative techniques make it easy and

pleasurable for the reader to be involved with the text, which is not the case with the history. History is boring and monotonous as compared to historical fiction.

Another creative and imaginative technique used by Shamsie in the novel is that she didn't name the city or the period in Pakistani history she is talking about. That is another element that places fiction at an upper hand to history, which is the open-ending of fiction. Keeping the place and era unnamed calls for the imagination of the reader to recall the political history of Pakistan and place the novel in it. Though Shamsie didn't mention the names but there are ample evidence in the novel that suggest the era as Zia ul Haq's martial law. Zia's martial law was the time of radicalization of society and violence was normalized. The element of fear and intimidation and house arrest of politicians also suggest the era being Zia's martial law as political leaders were jailed and executed and political activity was minimized. Hanging of the then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was the most influential politician of his time shows the helplessness of politicians in Zia's era. Another reason of not naming the place and the era may be that through this novel Shamsie wanted to critique on all the martial laws and military regimes in the country. It appears that giving name to individuals is very privileged status in front of Shamsie as only those characters are named in the novel that are portrayed as positive and are against the dictatorial policies of military ruler. Politician Salman Haq's name is significant in the sense that the name in Urdu language is 'truth' or 'right path' which was actually the name of General Zia ul Haq. By not giving President the name Haq and giving it to politician who is against him symbolizes the political struggle against the dictator as something on true and right path: "City's ten million inhabitants were out in the streets calling out his name, shouting out his last name, 'Haq! Haq!'" (Shamsie, 1998: 80). This text shows people's attitude towards the regime. They too believe Salman's way as truth and right thus chanting the slogans Haq Haq, to signify both the man and the struggle.

Historical fiction seems more productive than history writing as it helps in forming narratives. History informs reader with the fact and figures and incidents of the past without any usefulness in the present and any instruction for the future. On the other hand historical fiction has a didactic purpose attached. Historical fiction by placing characters in certain situation defines the course for future by learning from the mistakes of the past. Guiles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their essay 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia', explain the importance of anything by its productivity to humans. Comparing history and historical fiction using the critique of Deleuze and Guattari one may easily reach the conclusion of placing historical fiction at a far superior level to history.

Michael Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality* questions the productivity of history in modern society. He believes that every society has its own fissures and silences. According to him it is not by the use of discourse that these topics or issues are made perverse but by keeping the silence about these issues. History he thinks is unable to discuss those perverse issues thus maintaining the silence that is circulated by state apparatuses. Historical fiction on the other hand bears the courage to discuss the perverse issues of the society. Zia ul Haq's era as far as history is concerned seems very good and positive but the major part of the era i.e. the radicalization of society and the normalization of violence is not highlighted in history books. Fiction highlights the perverse issues of Zia ul Haq's era and presents the reader with a more vivid and authentic image of the era. "Following Nietzsche, Foucault denies that we can ever possess an objective knowledge of history. Historical writing will always become entangled in tropes; it can never be a science" (quoted in A reader's guide to contemporary theory, Seldon, Widdowson, Brooker). It shows Foucault's ideas about the objective approach of history that it claims. He argues that it is difficult to exclude the chances of subjective approach of the historian thus negating the objective element. As stated by him, there is no true discourse or history: "Claims to objectivity made on behalf of specific discourses are always spurious: there are no absolutely 'true' discourses, only more or less powerful ones" (qtd in A reader's guide to contemporary theory, Seldon, Widdowson, Brooker). He believes that there are no absolutely true discourses only more or less powerful, which makes historical fiction stands at a higher place than history because of the power it has in its narrative.

Conclusion

History books provide with facts and figures and events of the past without any way forward. Historical fiction on the other hand urges us to learn from the mistakes of the past. Keeping the past in mind historical fiction is helpful in making future better. Kamila Shamsie ends her novel on a positive note with an element of hope for the better times to come: "other days, Hassan would say just this: on 19th may a little before sunset, I was crossing from my parents' room to my bedroom while the hall door opened and a voice said the most extraordinary thing: Hassan" (Shamsie, 1998: 206) These lines are taken from text where Hassan was expecting the news of his Uncle's execution from

military court, but the news of death of dictator came. There is again no mention of death or end to dictatorial rule and novel ends here with epilogue beginning with following words: "The city air whispered of mangoes" (Shamsie, 1998: 207). It suggests the death of dictator as in the lines coming ahead Salman Mamoo is not in house arrest or in prison but playing with Hassan. Democracy is restored and the new elections are held. The element of hope helps humans to cope with bitter realities of life. Hope is what's missing in historical books and is present in historical fiction which places it at far superior level than history book.

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