

## Postmodern Fanaticism in Historiographic Metafiction: A Study of Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem*

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### **Abstract**

The postmodern historiography not only represents past events but also adds colours to the events and makes it as a signifying system. In this narrative, history is being rethought as a human construct. It becomes a fictional act to elaborate events through the magic of language and takes the readers to a realistic world. Historiographic metafiction is a post modern critical innovation in literature and it is characterized by intense 'self-reflexivity' and 'parodic intertextuality'. The present article attempts to validate Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Hare* with the aspects of Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction. It tries to portray that the novel is a historiographic metafiction rather than the traditional historical fiction. It examines the relationship between the reimagined and reconstructed historiographic metafiction. The study discusses the narrative style of the author which is in the mimetic approach. It reassesses the unknown facts of the marginalized women of the sixteenth century Mughal dynasty. It leads to the fact that marginalized groups are denied an official voice by hegemonic ideologies. Therefore, history is regarded as monologic, represented the dominant discourse.

**Key Words:** postmodern, historiography, historiographic metafiction, marginalized, mimetic.

The involvement of literature in history is something inevitable. The language which is used by the writers requires metaphors, phrases, and figures of speech, which are interpretative and fictitious. Writers in the postmodern era dismantle history and rewrite them to add beauty to the present literature. They simply insert their own creative ideas to makeup historical facts as White claims, "can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of these events and to endow them with different meanings serving different ideologies and worldviews" (224). They remake the historical facts that are sometimes forgotten and obscured. The

two methods the writer can engage with historical fiction are reimagination and reconstruction. Reimagination handles the historical events that deviate from the established historical record. It often relies heavily on parody and anachronism, furthermore emphasizes the insertion of incongruous events. Reconstruction is the more nuanced postmodern literary engagement with history. It focuses on marginal figures and historical events, bringing them to the forefront of a new historical platform.

Linda Hutcheon has coined the term 'historiographic metafiction' in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and the term has become a subgenre, which has a connection with postmodern imitation and its self-reflexivity. "In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative—be it in literature, history, or theory—that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past"(5). Historiographic metafiction also continues to produce silent histories of contemporary historical, political and cultural events. Reimaginative historiographic metafiction is highly fictionalized to the point of emphasizing its own lack of historical reliability. The reconstructive historiographic metafiction emphasizes the untold history and explains how it is apart from the historical mainstream. Applying the reimaginative and reconstructive to Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction forms the theoretical core of the argument. The select novel, which has been taken under historiographical metafiction is equally reimaginative and reconstructive over time. Podder has taken certain events and figures from history and has developed an exciting story out of it. She has reconstructed those historical figures and events. She has reinvented the subsistence of women in the sixteenth century Mughal dynasty. From the Mughal dynasty or Mughal history, the world knows only a few women like, Nurjahan, Mumtaz, Ruqquya Begam but through the method reconstruction a mere slave, fifteen years marginalized girl is centralized in her novel. The novel pictures the central figure Zeenet's life history as an individual mode of history writing. It depends on and elevates individual experiences as opposed to the conventional scientific historiography which attempts to totalize individual experience. This consists of personal historical accounts of Zeenet which are mingled with magic realism.

Postmodernist historical novels attempt to insert history into fiction to subvert historical facts and rewrite them from a perspective different from the accepted interpretation. In this kind of texts, silenced histories of marginalized groups are sometimes vanguard through the rewriting and subverting of historical material. Podder makes an attempt reconstruct Zeenet, a silenced individual as a grand narrative to speak for the group or society, her voice is now in conflict with the elite voices. As a result, the novel can be analyzed in terms of historiographic metafiction, in which 'ex-

centric' voices that are pushed to the sidelines of histories are re-presented. The story develops further when Zeenat is brought to the palace to satisfy the emperor's lust. She is forced to allow her to satisfy his passion. She thinks, "This is not real; this could not be happening to me" (9). The pessimistic treatment and coercion faces by Zeenat clearly suggests how women have been treated in the Mughal dynasty.

The safety of women in male dominated society is compromised. The society themselves perceive women as second-class citizens, any acts of crime against them would be considered as a norm. In addition to that, women are seen merely as sex-tools. Once the emperor tries of her, Zeenet is taken to the harem where she is forced to spend the rest of the life. This shows that men treat women just as sexual tools and keep them in the dark once all is done. History has recorded that Jahangir had about eight hundred concubines to satisfy him. The subversion of the objective historical discourse is achieved through the intermingling of metafictional strategies and historical reality in the process of constructing the individual mode of historiography.

In Podder's narrative, the individual plays an active role and vies for the centre, and her voice is in conflict with that of the dominant. Therefore, the monolithic discourse of history can be opened to multivocality. In order to open up the unveiled voice of the peripheries, Podder embraces women and makes them the center of the story and maintains the male domination and suppression of women throughout the novel. The author points out, "The men are allowed to marry as many times as they wish as they can enlarge their kingdom" (135). The princess would merely be another member of the royal harem. The Mughal princesses are not allowed to marry any men. The great emperor Akbar inflicts the law as he is afraid that the power may be misused through the princesses. The following excerpt shows that Princesses themselves knew that there was no marriage in their lives. "My dear sister, we are Mughal princesses. We are not allowed to marry, so forget about marrying an emperor", (135) teases Jahanara, the daughter of Shajahan. Such unfairness is showed in the dynasty. These clear distinctions show how the culture and society favour men compared to women.

Historians do not look into the characters and the traits of the people involved in the major incidences of history. It is the fiction writers who take the trouble to give life to the characters in the history. *Escape from Harem* describes the three generation of Mughal Dynasty from Jahangir to Aurangzeb elaborately and also highlights the silenced histories of marginalized groups such as cultural/political minorities, the colonized, and women through reconstructing historical facts, which are veiled in the records of history. It fills the vaccum made by the historians. The life style of the marginalized is depicted as " Zeenet pressed her scented handkerchief to the nose to block the stench of the open drains that are overflowing with musk. So this is where the poor people, who constructed the most amazing structure in the world lived, she thought sadly" (199). As a matter of fact, Podder looks the history from another perspective and unveils the life history of marginalized too.

In *Escape from Harem*, Podder invites the readers to think about the power of story-telling and its role in defeating obscurantism and intolerance. Podder creates a world through imagination that span centuries by converting events to fiction and makes it a reality. The plot is carefully thought out and it is full of fascinating historical references. The novel incorporates fictional characters, along with historical figures and events set during the Mughal Empire in India. The novel is a dreamlike novel of flesh and thought, of story-telling, honesty and lies. The fact and fiction combine together as yoke into whitening and remakes the work as Historiographic metafiction. This not only focuses the presentation of reality rather it emphasizes on the events through which reality can be professed.

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